JACOB VINCENT BALL

SOUVENIRS

TALES FROM A WANDERED WORLD

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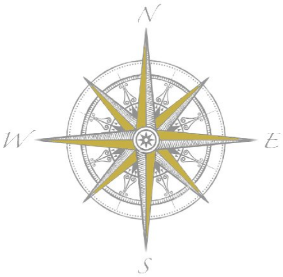
Tales From A Wandered World

Jacob Vincent Ball



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“To those who keep going, even when it stops making sense…”

PROLOGUE:

This isn't a book about travel highlights. It's about everything in between. The missed buses. The border crossings. The nights spent on concrete floors. The days that fell apart. The long stretches of nothing. The moments too quiet, too awkward, or too personal to share, but the ones that stick with you anyway, like bed bugs on your back.

The images and stories within my last book documented the world's CONTRAST. This one captures the rest. The soft chaos. The days that blur. The truths that hit at 3 a.m. on some unknown road. The sore bones. And sometimes, the moments of absolute awe. These are the SOUVENIRS. Not kept on dusty shelves, but hum beneath the skin.

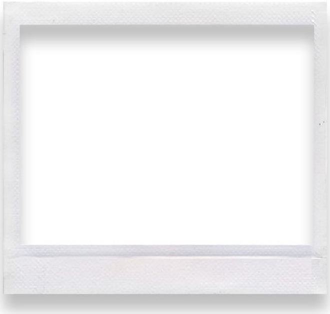
Honesty is easy. And thats what Ill give within this record of motion and all that comes with venturing to parts of the world sometimes less seen. Of being in it, uncertain, open, curious. A reminder that meaning found isn't always loud, dramatic, or perfect. Sometimes it's a soft moment. A flicker. A helping hand or a single *YES.*

Your own souvenirs might not come from far away. They might come from risk. From discomfort. From noticing something you didn't before. From choosing to stay present, even when it would be easier not to.

For me, travel has been a door. Not an escape, but a threshold. I wanted to see the world for myself. I wanted honesty from it, and to better understand my place in it. After that, I wanted to share it. Futile attempts, maybe, but sincere, trying to take the reader there through images and stories, always with an undercurrent of how familiar we all are. In sadness, in celebration, and in the one we all seek: Happiness.

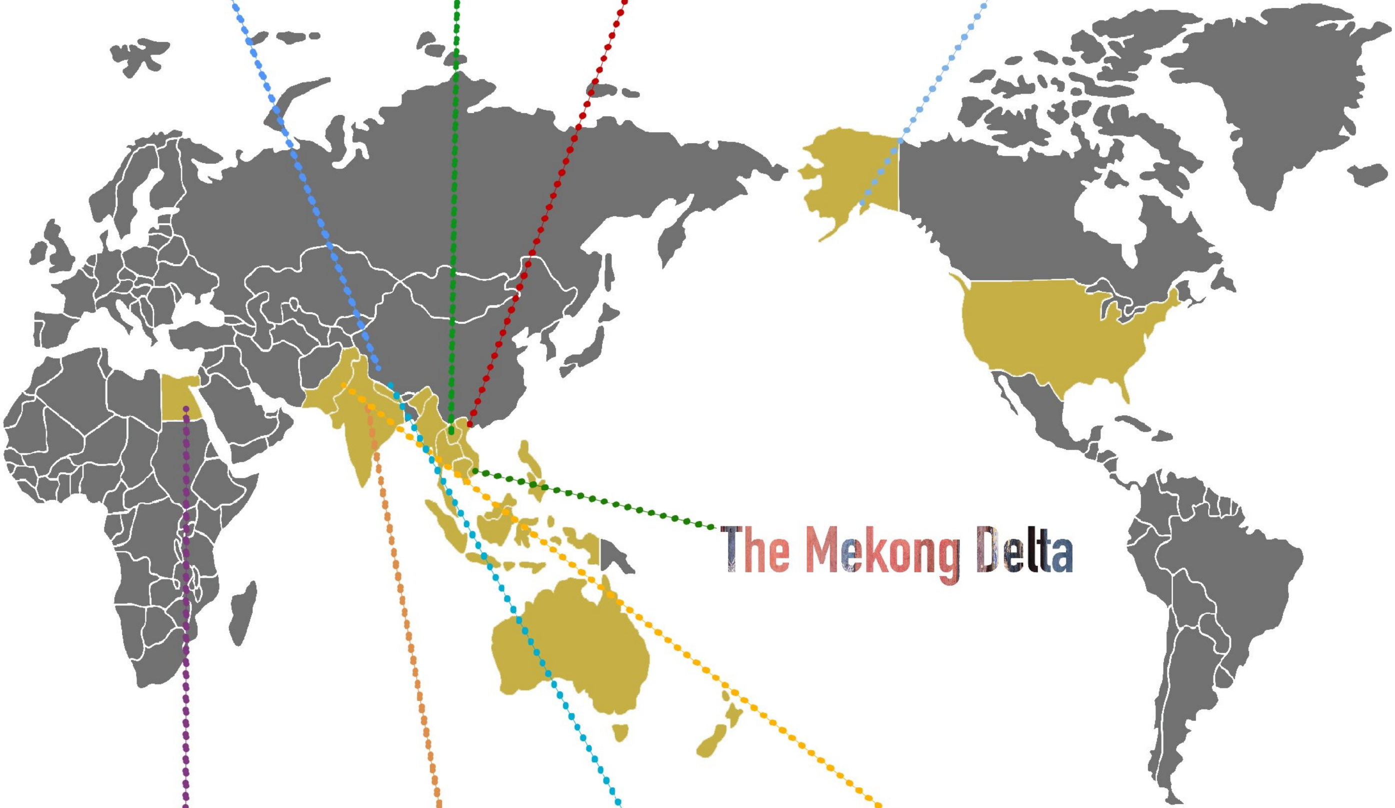
I used to think happiness was waiting on the other side, some distant reward after the struggle. But I know better now. Its what makes you *reach* for the handle. And if there's a truth that travels across all borders, it's that happiness – *true and honest happiness* – is the closest thing we have to proof that we're doing it right.

Our story is never in the picture. It's just outside the frame.



CONTENTS

mystery stew **Frozen Fingers** connection violent vomiting tears pain street chai sweet spicy
overpacked camel not amused narrow alley surprise festival sunrise haze camera hand unplanned trek blistered feet
monsoon rain waterfall adventure monk blessing accidental baptism **Food Poisoning** noodles sweat
tears midnight ferry endless mosquitoes lantern-lit river timeless glow unexpected snake sloppy tongue jungle standoff
customs line sweaty chaos **Ancient Ceremonies** out shoes
cobblestone streets zipline scream echoed regrets ill health monsoon market slippery drama forgotten sunscreen crispy
regrets river drift missed sunset floating markets chaos color rickety bridge trust issues diarrhea mistranslated sign spicy
regret **Naughty Monkeys** silhouettes wonder neon city sleepless buzz ancient ruins stolen silence
unhappy deal market vendor endless haggling wrong train unplanned adventure camel spit well-aimed shot weathered
faces silent stories accidental **Fever Dreams & Bucket Lists**
scooters city symphony violent vomiting confusion mysterious stew questionable aftertaste hitchhike gamble turned
treasure photography hustle perfect moment sunrise climb mist wonder ferry ride drifting hate dreams snowfall silence
profound peace mountain **Endless Mountains & Fear**
ocean breeze cleansing calm surprise monkey uninvited guest overpacked camel bad attitude dodging cows narrow escape
street food roulette surprise festival relentless honking surprise mud bath precarious bridge questionable integrity customs
queue eternal **Modern Hippies** forgotten sunscreen lobster face mistranslated menu culinary
horror clumsy trek epic rice field shit bucket tumble dubious guide wrong mountain awkward hammock misfire haunted
hostel scream echoed far hidden alleys cobblestone streets **Haunted Buildings** salty air
bustling harbor timeless shores sunrises fleeting glances tears pain tears joy



Ha Giang

The Tibetan Plateau

Chugach National Forest

Luang Prabang

The Mekong Delta

The Great Indian Desert

Jazirat Al Malik

Annapurna Region

The River Ganga

A World Worth Knowing:

When you see the world up close, it's less divided than you've been told. It's not broken. It's just real - a million cultures and contradictions, full of people who, more often than not, want the same simple things: comfort, safety, connection, dignity.

These places don't bend to suit you - and they never should. The world isn't a museum. It's not here to impress, entertain, or explain itself. But if you show up with humility, walk slowly, ask better questions, and leave your ego on the tarmac, it'll open up, as simple as pages in a book.

Some places offer beauty. Others, hard truths. Many, both. A few may shift your beliefs; more will just remind you what it means to be human. Because beyond the borders and noise, there's something universal in the way we gather, grieve, share meals, and laugh.

And eventually, the heaviest thing you stop carrying is fear. You leave it behind - not because the world is always safe, but because you understand the world reacts to how *YOU* approach it. To move through it aware of this cuts off a weight. You understand that your time, your attention, and your willingness to be open is a language understood by all. Given freely, felt deeply, and more valuable than any currency. (Though in some places, a camel still might get you further.)

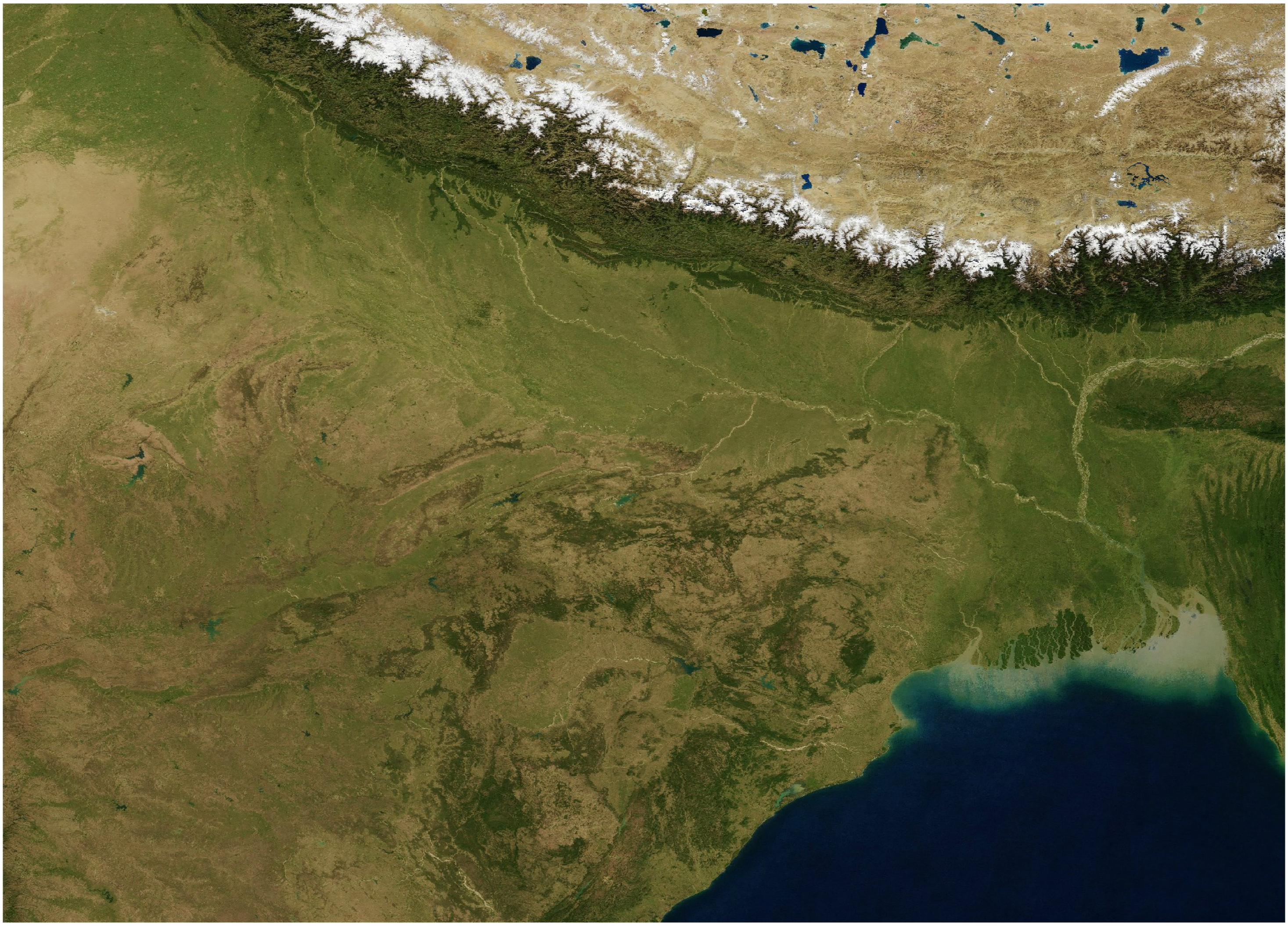
So read this not as a checklist of places traveled, but as a letter of honesty. Proof that the world is still wild, still complicated, still beautiful, still worth knowing and undeniably, still worth loving.

SOUVENIRS

The River Ganga

Uttar Pradesh Region / India:

Ganges River (India)



25.5941° N - 85.1376° E

“नेकी कर दरिया में डाल।”

“Neki kar dariya mein daal”

"Do good and throw it into the river"

A Hindi proverb encouraging selfless acts without expectation of return.

Into Varanasi, INDIA:

The overnight bus from Old Delhi to Lucknow was less about travel and more about endurance. The kind that separates those who travel for leisure from those who seek experience (or that are just plain stupid). It was 11pm when I climbed aboard, stepping over bundles of luggage, sacks of grain, spit, half eaten food and the occasional sleeping body. The air inside was thick with sweat and exhaustion, a human soup of fifty-odd passengers packed into a vintage bus that was likely to be done at anytime. My seat was one of those fold-down chairs in the aisle, a glorified plank that offered neither comfort nor security, but worst, my greatest fear, there was no toilet, which meant many long hours of restraint and the silent dread of when we'd stop next.

I had paid for a ticket all the way to Varanasi, or so I was told by the grinning & trustworthy receptionist at my grimy guesthouse in Old Delhi Market. In reality, the bus went only as far as Lucknow. I wasn't surprised. Scammed, yes. Annoyed, absolutely. But surprised? Not in the slightest. This was India.

Lucknow, in the raw heat of late morning, was a punishing place. It wasn't just hot, it was the kind of heat that weighted down on you, that made your shirt stick to your back within minutes of putting it on. It was also a city without charm, at least to the traveler arriving weary, tired and unprepared. It was crowded, chaotic and uninviting.

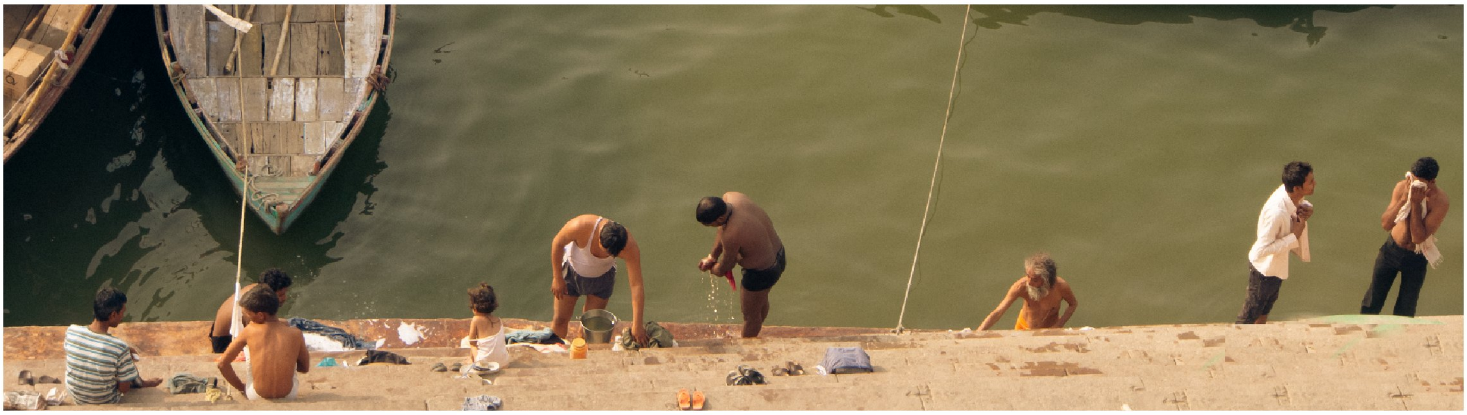
Panipat
HARYANA
Meerut
Dandeldhura
Jumla
Bhiwani
Delhi
Moradabad
Hapur
Rampur
New Delhi
DELHI
Ghaziabad
Pilibhit
Dhangarhi
NEPAL
Bulandshahr
Bareilly
Salyan
Baglung
Pokhara
Kathmandu
Budaun
Aligarh
Shahjahanpur
Nepalganj
Alwar
Mathura
Hathras
Sitapur
Bahraich
Bhairawa
Bhimphedi
Lalitpur
UTTAR PRADESH
Hetauda
Ramechhap
Bharatpur
Firozabad
Birganj
Agra
Lucknow
Jaipur
Etawah
Gorakhpur
Rajbiraj
Faizabad
Kanpur
Gwalior
Muzaffarpur
Fatehpur
Patna
Varanasi
Jhansi
Allahabad
BIHAR
Kota
Mirzapur
Bhagalpur
Aurangabad
Gaya
INDIA
Sagar
Dhanbad
JHARKHAND
Asansol
VINDHYA RANGE
Bhopal
Jabalpur
Ranchi
MADHYA PRADESH
Indore
Jamshedpur
SATPURA RANGE
Bilaspur
Raurkela
Medinipur
Sambalpur
Burhanpur
Bhilai
Raipur
CHHATTISGARH
Bhusawal
Amravati
Nagpur
Akola
ORISSA
Cuttack
Aurangabad
Chandrapur
Puri
Parbhani
Nanded
Brahmapur
Nizamabad
Karimnagar
Latur
Warangal
Bidar
Vizianagaram
Hyderabad
Vishakhapatnam
Gulbarga
Khammam
Kakinada

I found myself waiting at the bus station for four hours, a prime target for the local children who trailed me relentlessly, their hands outstretched, their eyes empty of anything but persistence, enforced by their nearby parents. I caved of course and a few Rupees each I gave, big mistake, that just added fuel to the fire. Seeking some kind of refuge, I crossed the street and ducked into a small restaurant. Inside, dozens of half-eaten meals sat abandoned on tables, each plate a feast for the legions of flies that swarmed in lazy, undisturbed circles. Without a world of a lie, there where thousands. It was a mystery as there were no customers, no rush, yet the staff made no effort to clear the wreckage. The place was stagnant, as if it had simply decided to give up and let the larvae feast.

I left, stepping back into the choking dust & scorching sun, back to the station, back to the same grasping hands and floor, decorated in a mosaic of faeces, dragged along from toilet to tile. Cow or human, take your pick. The ride from Lucknow to Varanasi was another seven hours of dust and discomfort, and when I finally arrived, it was to the expected onslaught of rickshaw drivers. A swarm, voices overlapping, each man hungry for a fare. I singled out an older driver, the younger ones have the energy to win most customers, but the older men, slower and quieter, I figure could use the Rupee. Competition in a place like this was merciless, and I figured I could do some good in the choosing.

Varanasi. Even in my exhaustion, even with the weight of the previous days travel, I felt it.

The city was alive in a way that was different from Delhi's chaos or Lucknow's indifference. It was something older, something sacred. Holy men wandered the streets with dreadlocks down to the ground, colourful scarfs and flower arrangements lined the shelfs of street stalls, ready to be gifted the the Mother Ganga. The streets I walked through to my hostel were a labyrinth, twisting and turning in ways that seemed more organic than planned. They pulsed with life, but also with filth, an entire alleyway seemingly dedicated to nothing but human and cow excrement, a gauntlet to navigate in thongs, a way of life unconsidered by most.



This was in 2013 before the i-plague: Rarley a smartphone. Before the safety net of a map & translator in your pocket. You relied on your instincts, on reading a city's movements, on the occasional and often conflicting directions from strangers. It was travel in its a more pure form, frustrating, messy, but more exhilarating.

The hostel was a simple affair, tucked away in the maze. "How long you stay?" the young man at the desk asked as he handed me the key. "Not sure" I said "three nights, four nights…a week" – "okay, okay, okay." He smiled.

Three flights of stairs later, I stepped into my room, spartan but rich in character, with bright blue paint imperfectly covering the timber walls and a bed that had likely been slept in by generations of wanderers before me. The afternoon light streamed in through the old wooden shutters, bathing everything in a golden hue. First stop: the shower. Cold water over sunburned skin, washing away the filth of hundreds of kilometers and fifteen uncomfortable hours. The water at my feet ran with dirt, the relief was infinite and instant. With my backpack half unpacked on the bed and a towel tied around my waist, I stepped onto the small balcony, pushing open the red doors. And there it was. The Ganges, sprawling below in its ancient, unwavering presence. A river of stories, of prayers, of ashes, filth and life, moving in its slow and steady current.

I exhaled, long and deep. I had arrived.
The moment exactly as I had envisioned.
It just smelled different.

No set destination within the city, just walk, camera at the ready, open mind, open itinerary, and a pocket full of rupees for the unexpected roads (or boats, or rickshaws) potentially taken this day.

The ancient sandstone buildings, dusted with infinite time, lead down to the riverbank, lined with large concrete steps descending to the River Ganges. People, cows, dogs, birds, all in abundance in the shallows, praying, cooling off, bathing, doing laundry, washing dishes. And among all this: Rubbish. Infinite rubbish with a healthy dose of animal and human waste, and, about thirty meters from the banks, if you sit long enough, human remains floating by. To the South are the prayer ghats, where the devout come in droves to worship; to the North, the burning ghats, where rituals dating back thousands of years are held, breaking the cycle of rebirth. To the west, the chaotic streets roar with a million decibels. Markets, street vendors, shopfronts all side by side with cars, rickshaws, cows, and pilgrims, draw towards the riverbank.

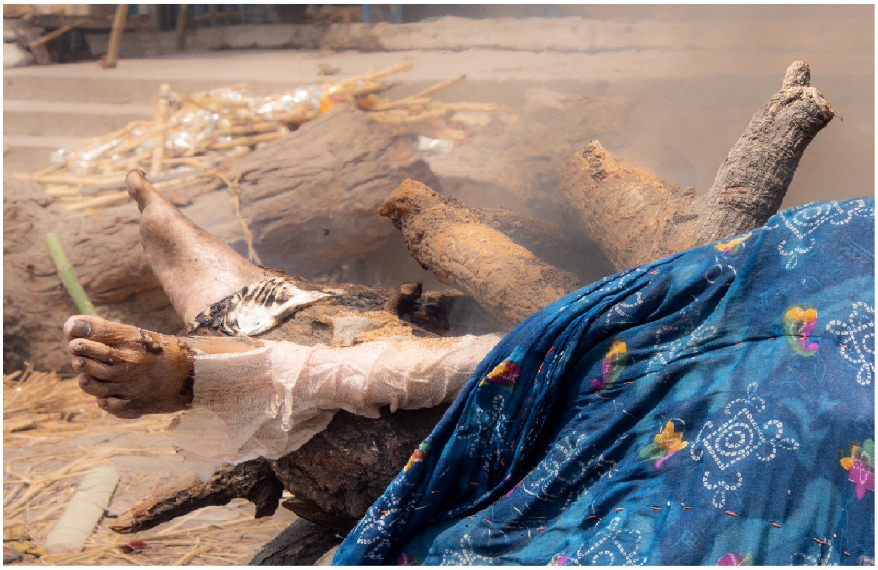
Travelers are bombarded with scenes never experienced before, holy cows wandering among vintage taxis as open wounds move with maggots, stillborn calves lying in gutters outside mobile phone repair shops, their dusty glass cabinets filled with Nokia 3210s. Holy men covered with white ash, draped in orange veils, appear as ghost, dreadlocks dragging on the ground though liquids of mystery while aggressive bartering takes places over fake gold watches.

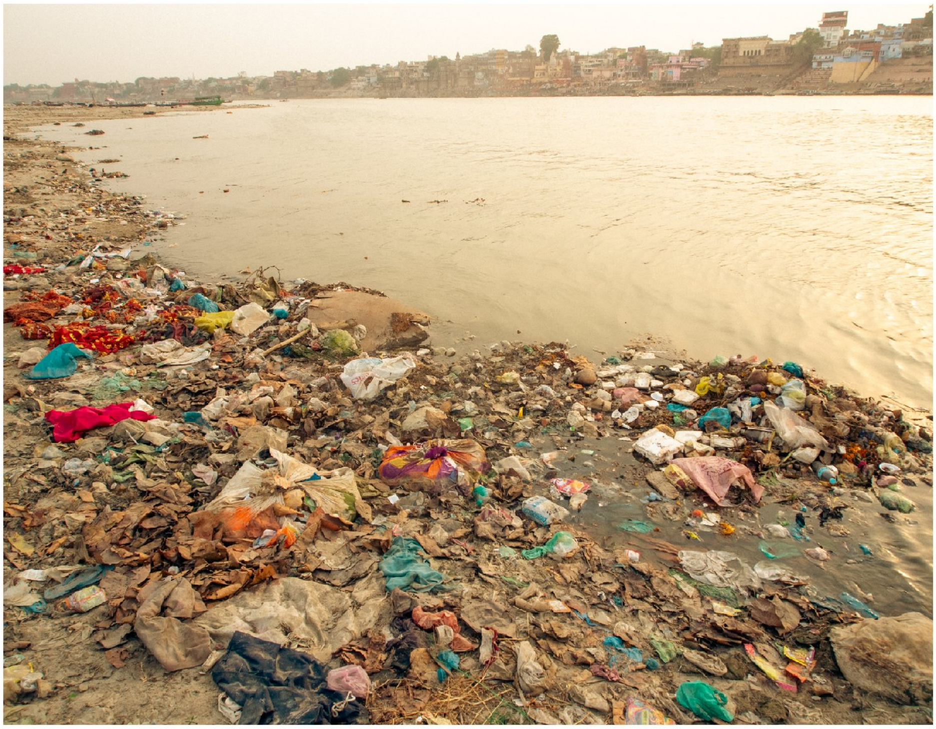
Men shake your hand and don't let go, asking for the millionth time in India, "Where are you from?" That question only means, "I want your money, and I will scam, trick, beg, or steal to get it." No hard feelings, life here is fucking hard. It is a constant hustle, dawn till dusk, just to get the bare minimum needed to survive. There is no help here, only one's own hands will provide. *Nowhere else in the world is as this place.*

I wandered side streets until I reached the Burning Ghat, behind it, piles of wood standing at the ready for the fires that burn 365 days a year, next to it, a seemingly abandoned three-story concrete building, empty and unfinished. I wandered inside, climbing the stairs to the roof for a broader view and at the top, I was met by a young man. "Of course" I thought, as there isn't ten square feet in India that isn't occupied. But he was friendly, spoke perfect English, and didn't ask "where are was from?" thank christ. There was intent in his voice. We spoke not about the usual "What do you do" or "Are you married?" but about the culture of things. He was on holiday, visiting the holy Ganges with family and needed to get away from them for a bit. He was studying to be a nurse in Delhi and, like me, was fascinated by the burning ghats.

Eventually, he asked, "Have you been in the final building?"
"No. What is that?" I asked.
"Right there," he said, pointing at a bare-bones, four-story concrete structure.
No windows or features, just poured concrete.
"It's where the sick and elderly spend their final days."
"Fuck… okay," I said, taken back.
"You should have a look," he responded.

Shortly after, I found myself quietly wandering up the stairs of said building, and within, around 15 rooms with no doors nor decorations, nothing but single wooden beds and a small table. In most, the old and ill layer while a single family member sat by their side. As I continued, I understood that here: death was met with simplicity. No worldly possessions or creature comforts, just a final end to the cycle of rebirth, of new birth and death. It was to be, as they wished, a Hindu's final moments within this physical world before passing into the ephemeral. One room, in particular, had around ten people packed inside. A grandmother had already passed, wrapped in a blue sari shawl with flowers scattered loosely atop her. The discussion (in Hindi) was about what time she would be taken down to the ghat for her cremation. As I passed the doorway, I stood out like a firecracker in a library. Two men noticed and, very warmly, said, "Hello." They were relatives, and they spoke about the whole tradition and process and eventually, within the conversation, they asked about my camera.
"Are you photographing this?" one gestured toward the burning ghat.
"If I can with the families approval, I will" I replied. "Yes you come" he said with a head wobble,
"you come with us this afternoon".
And with their permission, under a smokey orange sky:





The river was a mirror of contradictions, sacred yet sullied, revered yet disregarded. It carried the weight of the city's faith and its waste in equal measure, and I wanted to see what lay beyond its well-trodden ghats. The opposite bank, an expanse of sand that seemed to hold a few souls.

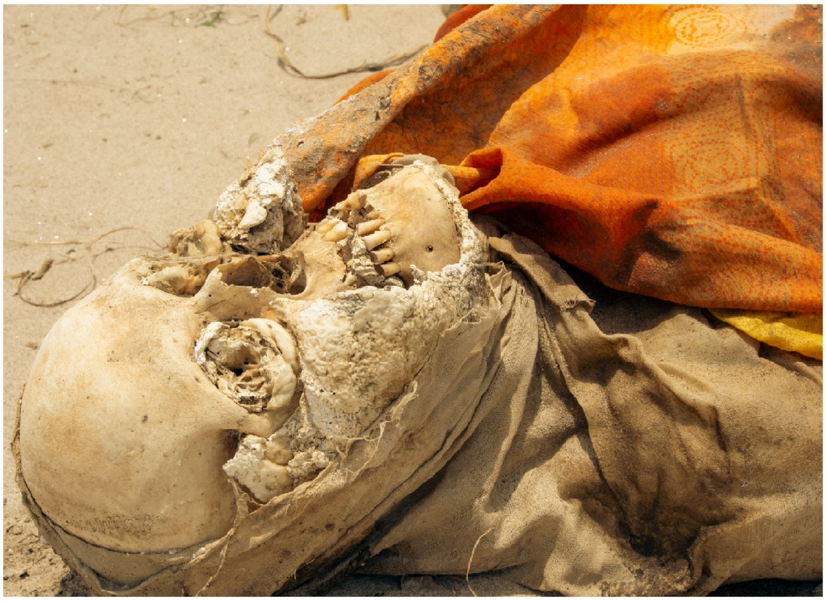
At the river's edge, a cluster of wooden boats bobbed lazily in the murky current, they're oarsmen loitering, watching, waiting. A man, lean and sun-darkened, caught my eye and gestured towards his boat. I nodded. No haggling. No talk of price. We both knew this wasn't a service with fixed rates. I was to pay what he wanted. Stepping in, I felt the anticipation of the things I presumed to see with each pull of the oar. The sounds softened, the ceaseless chanting, the crackling of funeral pyres, the street hawkers' cries, all blending into a distant hum. The water lapped gently against the hull, and I let my hand trail over the surface in hopes of some connection as to why these waters are so revered, a desiring to feel the pulse of something ancient and holy. Preferable not rotten.

As we drifted away from the ghats, the river began spewing its contents into view. Plastic bottles and tattered cloth floated past, mingling with marigold petals and half-burnt logs from the funeral pyres. Then, something more. A bloated limb, pale and waterlogged. A skull, stripped bare, its hollow eyes staring skyward. The Ganges was both a passage and a graveyard, delivering the dead not just to the pyres but also to the current, where they would find their own unceremonious end.

Tour Travels

The man didn't speak, didn't acknowledge what passed us by. Perhaps he had long since stopped seeing it. The boat scraped against the sand, and I stepped onto the bank. Here, the city's chaos ceased. No buildings, no streets, just an open stretch of sun-bleached earth that stretched endlessly. But it wasn't untouched. Far from it. The river's offerings had all found their way here. At first, it seemed like just another dumping ground, a wasteland of discarded garlands, torn saris, broken clay pots. But then, under the glare of the midday sun, the true nature of this place revealed itself. The remains of the forgotten lay scattered, half-buried in the shifting sands. A ribcage, bleached white, protruded from the ground like a relic of some long lost civilization. A human jawbone, teeth still intact, nestled beside a discarded plastic bag. Fragments of skulls, tibias, femurs - some scorched black from incomplete cremations, others gnawed by stray dogs before the river had reclaimed them.

I walked slowly, stepping carefully between remnants of lives once lived. This wasn't a place of ceremony like the ghats. There was no fire, no final rites. Just silence. The wind blew across the sand bank, shifting the surface, revealing more bones, more stories washed ashore and forgotten. A lone figure moved in the distance. A boy, sifting through the debris with practiced hands. Scavenging. Looking for something of value, a trinket, a coin, a piece of cloth still worth selling. His movements were methodical, his expression unreadable. He didn't glance up as I passed. He only glanced when my camera was raised.



Further along, the carcass of a cow lay bloated in the sun, its ribs exposed where birds had begun their work. Flies swarmed in thick clouds, undeterred by the heat. I covered my nose with a makeshift mask, but occasionally, the stench was unavoidable. This was the other side of Varanasi. No prayers, no rituals, just the raw reality of what happens when the sacred meets the inevitable. When the monopolizing of the Ghats is ignored and one is simple *placed* into the river.

I turned back toward the boat. The oarsman waiting, squatting in the sand, watching the river. He said nothing as I climbed back in, the boat pushed off and the city drew closer once more. The smoke from the burning ghats drifted skyward, the chants and cries growing louder as we neared. The river over the last millennium had carried a million souls, and now, had carried me to an experience I would hold until my own day of passing, from this physical, into the ephemeral.

I stepped ashore, slipping once more into the living. The city swallowing me into its chaos.

HOW MUCH YOU SAY ?
The ticket stub read 90 rupees, crisp and impersonal, while the receipt, hand written & scribbled with hurried ink, demanded 300. Yet, the man behind the counter, a sweaty, chain-smoking figure slumped against the ticket booth, gruffly barked for 500.

The layers of deceit felt almost labyrinthine, as if the very act of traveling here came with an unspoken tax on naivety. Even the scammers seemed tangled in their own web, losing track of their own stories, caught between honesty and performance.

Traveling India without falling prey to a scam is like swimming without getting wet; inevitable and strangely a part of the experience. The trick, perhaps, is to learn to laugh through the chaos, to recognize the theater of it all, and to wade through it with a kind of patient resignation, knowing you're simply a player in this ever-unfolding script.

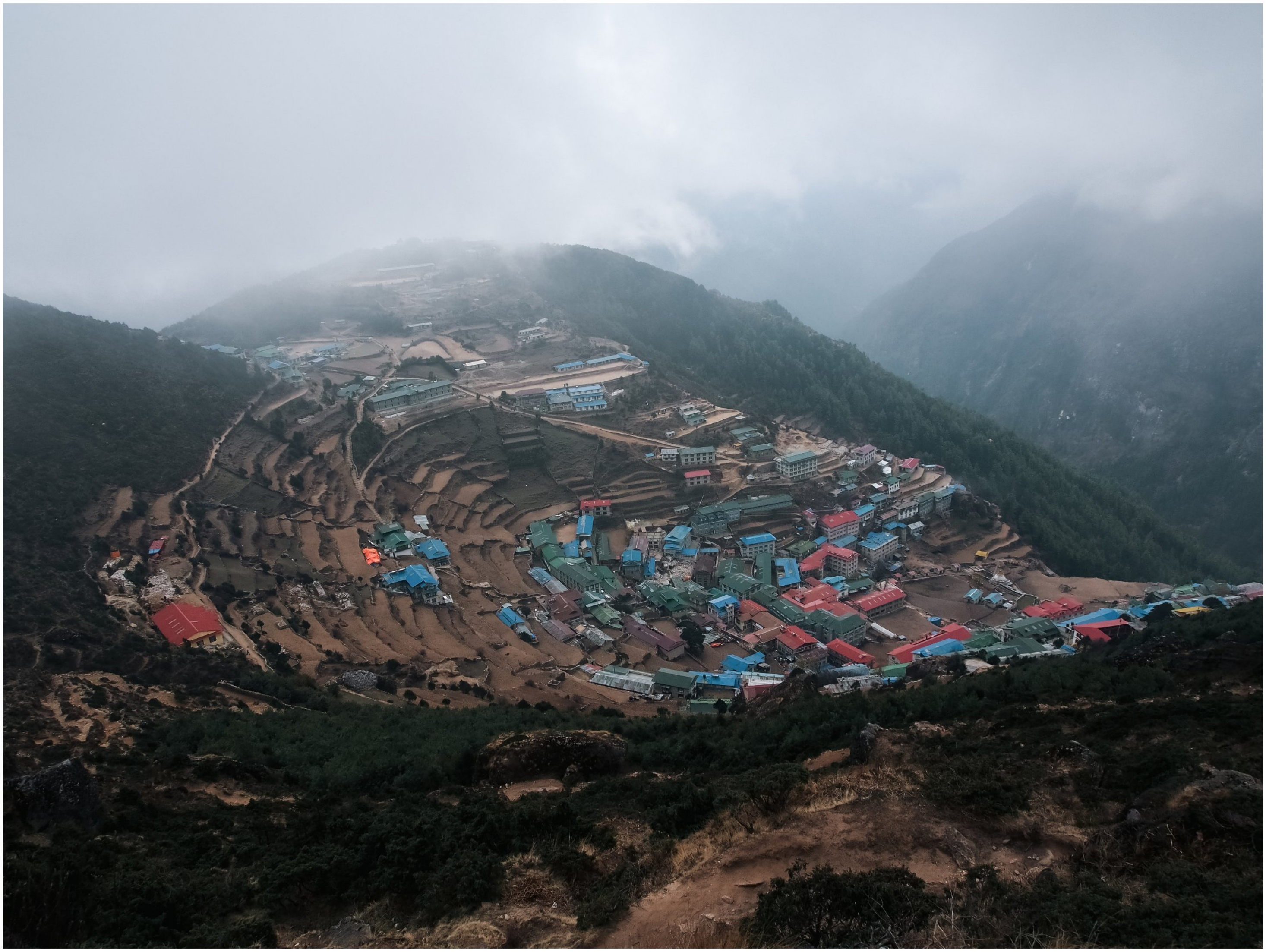
ogi's
uest House
& Restaurant

TIPS:
1) Dont be a push over. A little is fine, but throw a wink their way to let them know, that YOU know, there charging a bit more than they should be.

2) Alot is not. Greed should NEVER be rewarded, be it in any circumstance or facet of life.

3) Bark (loudly) at random. A little bit of crazy can sometimes do you ALOT of good.

Namche Bazar, THE HIMALAYAS:



High in the heart of the Himalayas, the journey there mirroring the path to Shangri La: Days of trekking through forests, across swaying suspension bridges, with snow-capped peaks looming ever closer. Perched on a mountainside, it is the gateway to Mt Everest. Its narrow streets cut between stone houses, bright prayer flags fluttering overhead while the Sherpa carry impossible loads, their foreheads wrapped in straps supporting baskets heavy with supplies.

In the early morning, the village is bathed in cold, blue light. The smell of yak butter tea and frying dough fills the air. Trekkers gather in small cafés, poring over maps, tracing the routes ahead. Time here bends to the mountains' rhythms, slow, deliberate, without urgency. I wandered the village, finding warmth in small gestures, a bowl of thukpa shared by a shopkeeper, a smile from a women on stone steps. Nights were colder, the sky split open with stars, the distant roar of the Dudh Kosi River echoing through the valley.

Life, even at the edge of the world, carries on, woven together by community,
tradition, and the ever-present hum of the mountains.

CENTRAL MYANMAR:

SHARK
ENERGY DRINK
Myanmar
(Burma)

Leave your phone at home. Study the guidebook. Remember places of interest. Memorize the maps. Attempt some of the language. Then, leave it all behind. Follow your gut. I only took what I could remember. Names of pagodas that didn't make the top lists. A vague sense of direction. A can of Shark energy drink and the camera. Without direction the land becomes something else, a map you walk by instinct. You smell smoke, hear temple bells, watch farmers drying peanuts on sheets stretched across the road. You start to trust that if you keep moving, something worth seeing or photographing will reveal itself. Leave the busy places for others. Find your own quiet corner. It might not be as grand, but it's yours. And when it's quiet enough to hear your own footsteps echo down stone stairwells, that's when the place begins to speak its history.

I saw it happen. Around 200 people crowded around Bagan's three largest temples at sunset, snapping photos from the same crowded ledges. Guides yelled through megaphones in ten different languages. It was a shit show, not a ritual. But just a few kilometers away, I found a smaller pagoda, its gate loosely shut with a chain and a busted padlock that looked more decorative than functional. I pushed it open. Narrow stairs spiraled into the dark, worn smooth by centuries of feet. At the top, silence. A perch no one else had claimed. I sat there alone, camera in hand, watching the sun drop behind a field of forgotten temples. Maybe someone else had sat there hundreds of years ago. Maybe not. But for that hour, you become a part of its story.

Do your best not to aim for perfection. The world has other plans. The buses will run late. The skies will cloud over. The temple you dreamed of will (most definitly) be under scaffolding. But that's fine. Perfection should never be the goal. The better skill is adaptation, the ability to shift with what the road gives you.

On that same day in Bagan, I tore the ass out of my pants squeezing though a small temple opening. I got a flat tire. I ran out of camera battery. But I also found a tea & coffee shop run by a man who sat and taught me three phrases in Burmese. I still cant remember them. While my tire was getting fixed across the road, he pointed me toward a temple with no well worn path leading to it. And that detour, that wasn't a mistake. That was the story. A conversation with the unexpected.

P VÀ LÀM THEO TẤM GƯƠNG ĐẠO ĐỨC HỒ CHÍ MINH
HONDA

Arrival, Hanoi:

The minibus coughed me out somewhere near the Old Quarter, as it had done with a million travelers before me. There was no terminal, no tidy drop-off zone, just the sudden halt of tires, the side door cracking open, and my pack thudding onto the curb. A gesture. Off you go. This is you.

The street is a heartbeat, a ceaseless, pulsing artery clogged with scooters, sandals, and a thousand conversations carried on the backs of exhaust fumes. In Hanoi's Old Quarter, traffic rules didn't exist, only choreography. It wasn't chaos, not really, it was a dance passed down through generations, as intrinsic as morning tea. The woman in the red floral blouse walked with confidence, gliding past motorbikes with bowls of something hot balanced in her hands, never looking left or right. The boy beside her hunched over his scooter, eyes scanning the crowd like a general surveying his troops. Above him, power lines clung to leaning poles, a black tangle of necessary madness.

Everything here functioned in defiance of Western expectations. To call it "disorder" would be to misunderstand it entirely. This wasn't disorder, it was local design. From the plastic stools lining the curb, where men smoked and sipped cà phê đá, to the shopfronts tucked behind tarps and trees blooming from concrete, the street carried its own rules, its own time.

A woman in a conical hat adjusted the strap of her basket and stepped into the current of bikes. Somewhere behind her, a loudspeaker played a state-sponsored anthem from another decade. It was part announcement, part memory, the war long over, but still echoing in daily ritual. A few French balconies above the fray hinted at another century.

Paint peeled in layers, colonial, then communist, and now capitalist, all at once.

Around the lake at Hanoi's center, life unfolded. Elderly men played chess beneath banyan trees while couples strolled hand in hand, their fingers whispering at romance. Teenagers leaned against their scooters, laughing out loud. Women in conical hats sold grilled corn from makeshift carts. At dawn, the city breathed in unison, tai chi circles rippled along the water's edge, incense coils burned at tiny shrines, and soft Vietnamese ballads spilled from old radios. It wasn't a performance. Just life, as it's always been.

Anonymous in my anonymity, I stood with a camera slung low and tried not to blink too fast. I didn't speak the language, and failed at keeping up with its rhythm. I smiled, stepped forward, and vanished into it.

Unaware then, but this would become my favorite city in Southeast Asia. Not for its beauty, though it has plenty, but for its noise, its refusal to slow down. In a world where cities everywhere seem desperate to chase the latest global trend, Hanoi stands apart. It offers a reminder that progress doesn't require forgetting who you are. Here, tradition isn't a relic, it's a living, breathing force, inviting you to slow down, to pay attention, to feel the weight of history stitched into everyday life.

It doesn't feel like a city. It feels like being inside someone's bloodstream.

The Game of Nothing:

Buses, trains, planes, tuk-tuks, ferries, minibuses that may or may not exist, scooter rides, airport layovers:

If I could compress all the hours I've spent waiting into full 24hr days, my guess would be that at least three solid months have been just sitting in waiting:

90 full days or a quarter of a year. In waiting.

Sitting in places where movement was promised but rarely delivered on time. Station platforms stained with betel nut. Plastic chairs with backs that bowed under your western weight. Concrete ledges radiating the kind of heat that cooks your calves from below.

Sometimes I wonder what all that time added up to. If I'd been moving forward instead of sideways, waiting on a connection that always felt slightly delayed. Most of these hours were unremarkable. Just long stretches of stillness, wedged between moments of action. A market woman dozing with her head tucked between sacks of turmeric and onions. A stray dog curled beneath my bench. The metallic chime of cutlery from a nearby tea stall. Dust hanging in the afternoon light like it, too, had nowhere better to be.

You learn things in these pockets of pause. How to be still, for one. How to stare at your hands and see them as foreign. How to notice time when it's doing absolutely nothing. You meet versions of yourself that only come out when there's no Wi-Fi, no plan, no real sense of where or when you'll move next. In the cities, the world rushes. But at these terminals, these dusty, echoes, in-between places, it breathes. Slowly. Reluctantly. Sometimes not at all.

There's a particular kind of fatigue that builds up from all this non-movement. Not the tiredness of trekking or sightseeing or navigating unfamiliar streets, but something deeper. The exhaustion of transition. Of always being on your way to somewhere else.

A half-spilled Fanta. A child crying three seats away. A rooster tied to someone's ankle.

There's no reward for enduring these lulls. No story you can tell later over drinks. Just hours no one sees.
A half-spilled Fanta. A child crying three seats away. A dozen chickens stuffed in a basket, shitting on the sidewalk.

But I think the waiting is part of it. Maybe even a strong point. It teaches you to relinquish control, to surrender to timing that is never yours. In these hours, you're not a tourist, not even a traveler. You're just a body. A soul in transit. A witness to other people's Tuesdays. It's where you remember that the world doesn't revolve around you, or your plans, or your need to get somewhere. Sometimes, you just sit. You wait. You exist for a few hours in a town you'll never return to, watching someone else's normal pass by.

And then, eventually, something rattles around the corner, a horn, a bell, a driver yelling out of the window, and the moment breaks. The stillness dissolves. You grab your pack, shoulder it without ceremony, and step onto whatever's moving, even if it's crawling. A bus, a truck, a tuk-tuk, it doesn't matter. You climb aboard and sit where you can, knees up, bag in your lap, dust in your teeth. And just like that, you're off again. Until the next stop. The next bench. The next stretch of waiting that drags on. That plastic chair half in the sun, that broken fan humming somewhere nearby & those hours spent going nowhere that blur together and slip through the cracks of memory.

The moments I don't write down, the images buried on a hard drive somewhere, the stories no one ask about.

BAMBOO, BONGO'S & BOOMS:

VANUATU: The ride to the other side of Tanna Island was in the back of a ute. No cab chatter. Just wind, dust and that suspension - bruising the tailbone. The road turned to dirt, the jungle thinned, and soon we were crossing a black sea of sand. Up ahead, Mount Yasur smoldered. Smoke poured from its crater, spreading across the sky, diluting the sun.

When the truck stopped, the driver gave a point down a trail and was gone. The engine hum left. Now it was jungle and quiet. Birds sung, wind echoed, until the mountain cracked open.

A roar punched through the trees and hit me square in the chest. The sound came low, like the world itself was a sub woofer. Twenty seconds later, again. Another blast, deeper, louder. The longest silence that followed was maybe fifteen minutes. The ground buzzed, every living thing tuned out when it exploded.

I'd arrived at a jungle-clad property directly across from the entrance to the crater trail. The woman who greeted me was barefoot and wore vines for the guests theatre. She was beautiful. All posture and presence, with a perfect smile. She walked down a narrow path, leading me to my room, a bamboo bungalow.

And I mean bamboo. Roof, walls, bed frame, the whole thing stitched from stalks and string. One bed. One fan. One power socket. That was it. Jungle pressing in from every side, smoke curling overhead, and somewhere beneath us, a beast flexing its lungs.

I wasn't heading up to the crater until the following evening. So that night's plan was simple: a flask of Fireball, a couple of strange burger-ring chips called Bongo's I found in a corner store, water, and a chair made from the same stuff as the walls.

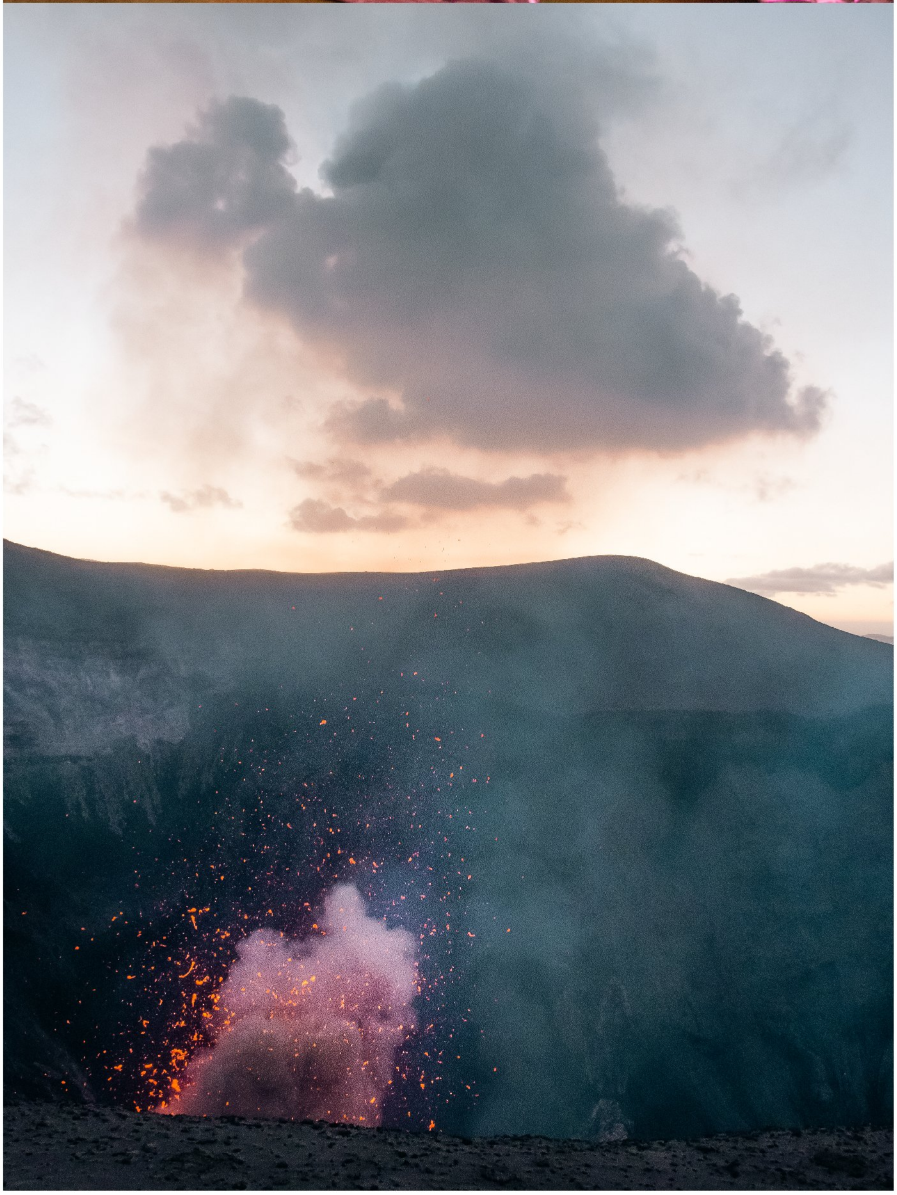
As I dropped my bag and stepped into the doorway, it came again, a Shockwave rolled through the earth. The entire bungalow rattled. The walls squeaked and shivered with each blast. Deep, sub-bass thunder passed through the floorboards and into your spine. That sound would become the rhythm of the night. A low growl. A distant, prehistoric drumbeat.

There were a few others staying in the bamboo cabins beside mine. Travelers. Quiet types. That evening, as the sun dipped and the sky bruised violet, we all sat outside, each on our own little porches, bamboo chairs creaking, drinks in hand. No music. No small talk. Just jungle, smoke, and hell itself glowing a few hundred meters away.

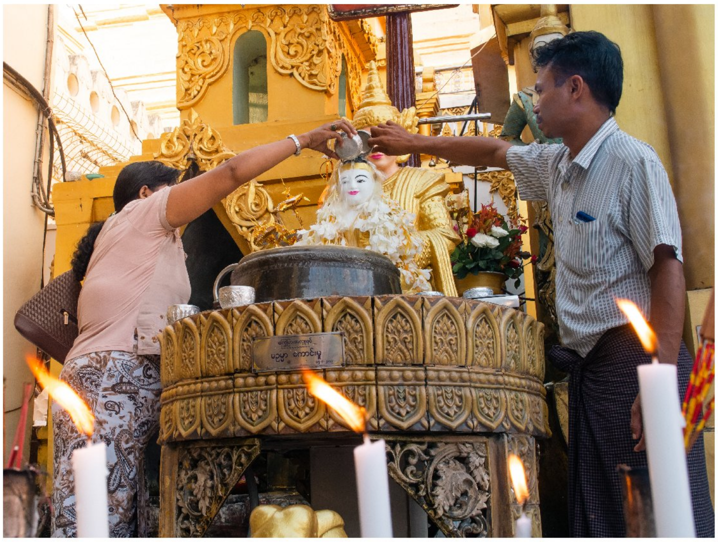
When darkness fell, the volcano lit up. Flames cracked out of the crater, unseen, but flaring into the sky like the earth was exhaling fire. You didn't need to see it to feel it. Each blast was a heartbeat in your chest. We just sat there, sipping slowly, looking up, letting it shake through our surroundings, like we were warming ourselves next to the worlds biggest campfire.

From the edge:
The crater boiled, glowing at its core, throwing fire skyward through the sulfuric haze.

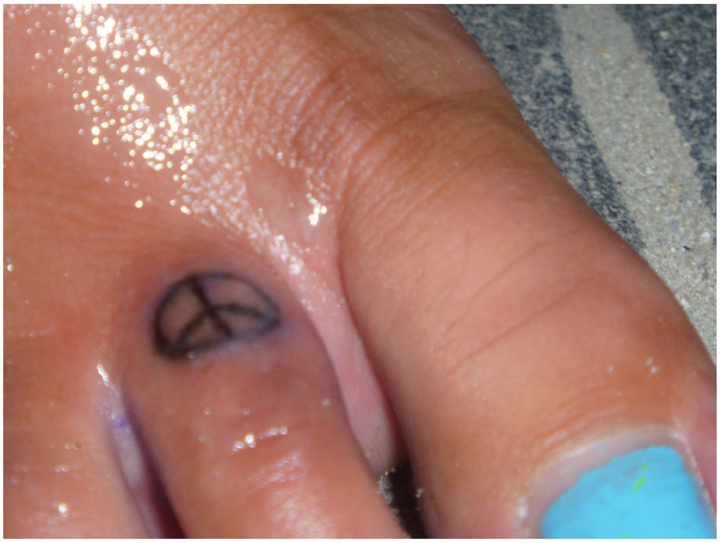
FIREBALL
CINNAMON WHISKY
Vanuatu Water
MUNCH ON A Bongo NOW!
Bongo
Cheese



Tanna Island, VANUATU *“Island Timetables”*
The boat was late. The driver was high. The reef cut the horizon in half like broken glass, and the sunset spilled over like a fountain. Everyone talks about island paradise. But here, paradise smokes. It spits lava. It exists under the surface in a secret world of near silence.



Yangon, MYANMAR *“Wash the Buddha, Watch the City”*
You’re supposed to pour water on the Buddha's head for good luck. Born on a Tuesday? Wash the Tuesday Buddha. Simple. Except nothing in Yangon at this time is simple. Monks walk barefoot past riot cops. The temples glitter while the power grid dies. Incense burns, phones beep, politics tremble. But the ritual stays. Water. Hands. Quiet blessing.



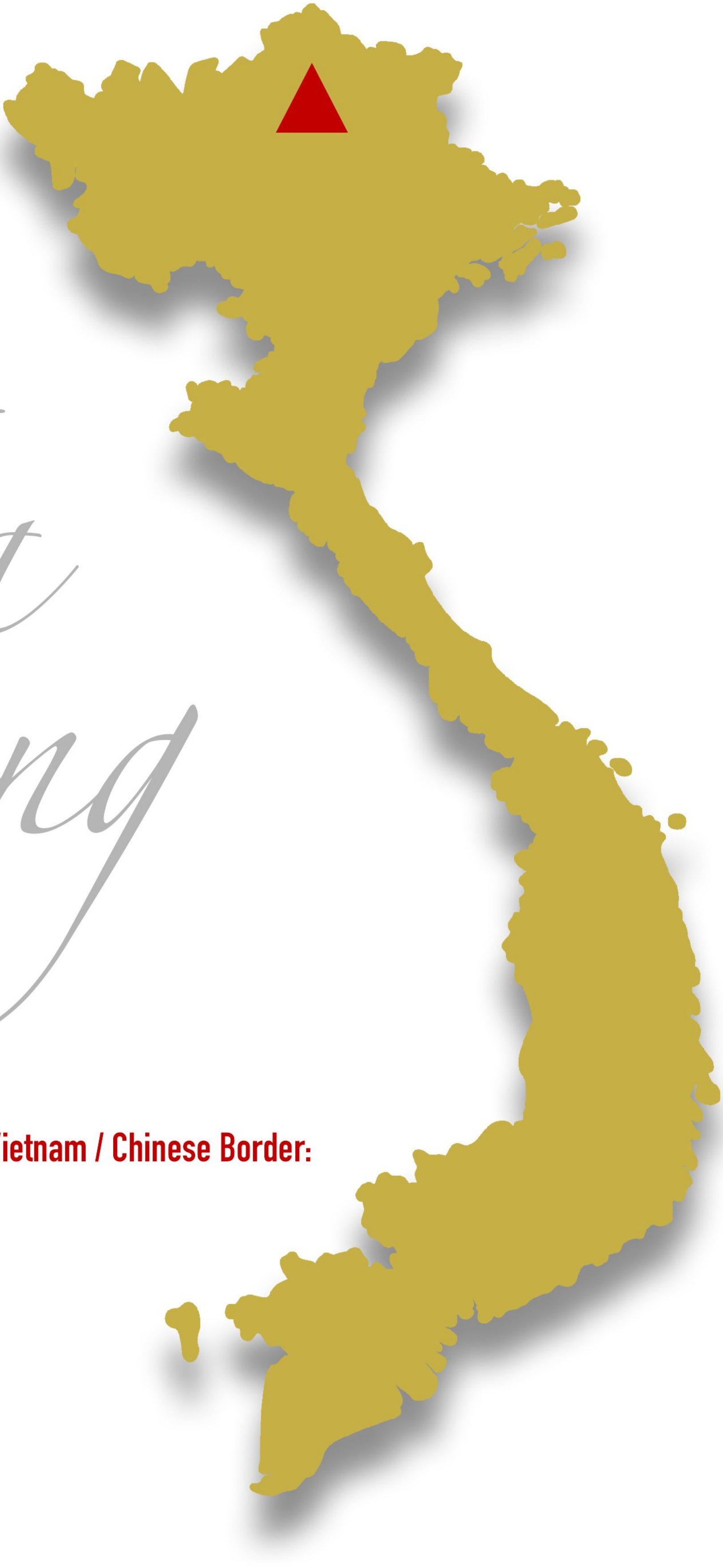
Phi Phi Island, THAILAND *“Buffalo Soilders”*
She wanted her first tattoo. Drunk. Sunburnt. Wet from the sea. Some guy in a Bob Marley tank top offered a “clean needle.” A peace sign. On her toe. In a market stall playing Swedish house music. She limped. After someone gave her a bucket of something neon and alcoholic.

Everest Region, NEPAL *“Alltitude & Yak Dung”*
The lodges are run by welcoming Nepali women. The tea tastes like comfort and warmth. It taste like respite from all the discomfort and cold outside the window. Prayer flags flap like chaotic butterflies. Then the snow starts falling. Silent. Slow. A yak snorts like it knows it in for a cold night.

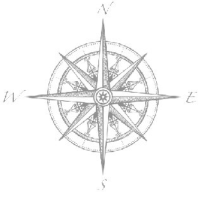
"Sunrise and the burn of a thousand steps."

Northern Vietnam – 2022

Ha Giang



Northern Vietnam / Chinese Border:



Ha Giang (Vietnam)

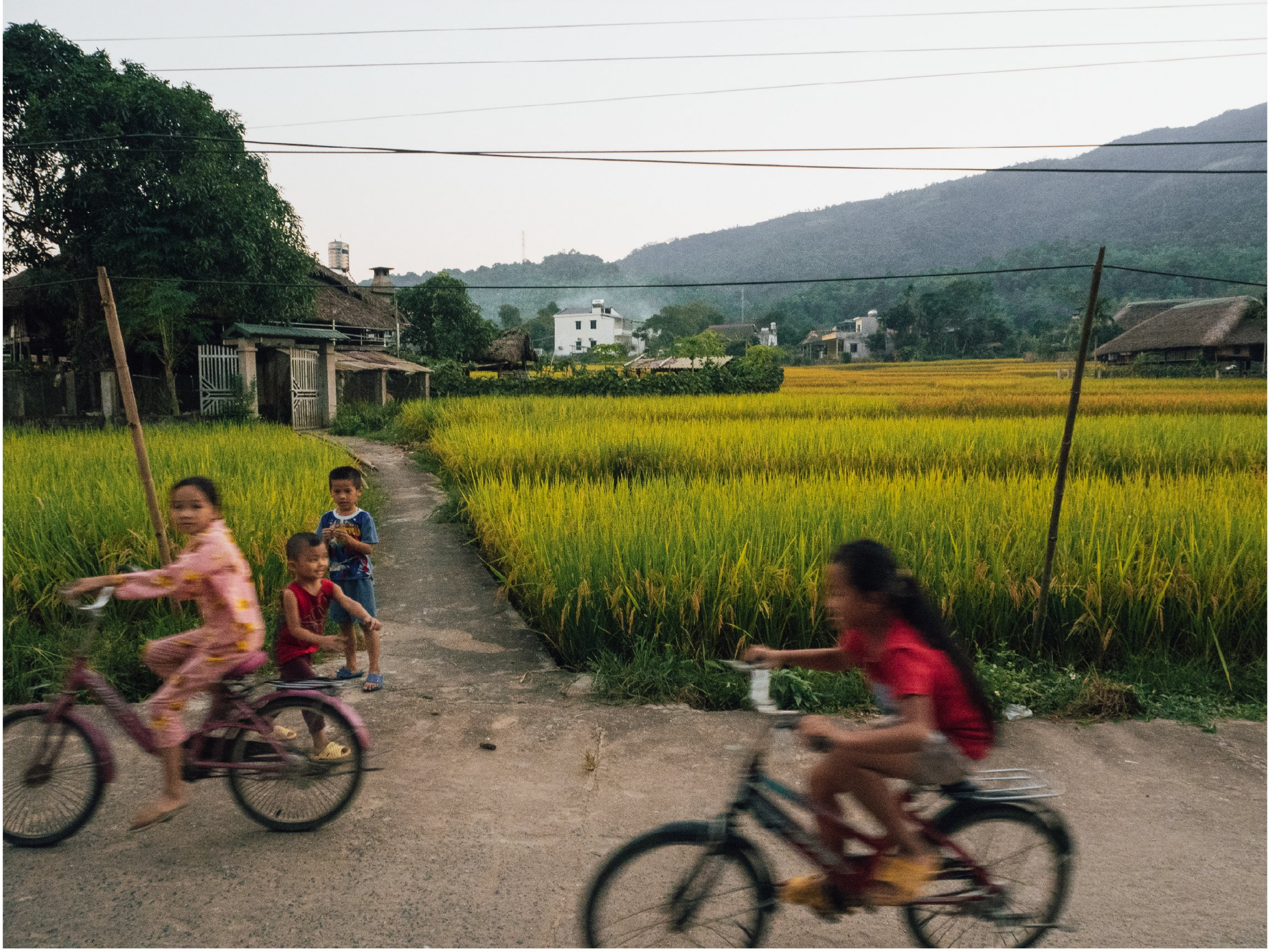
22.8233° N – 104.9833° E
“Sông có khúc, người có lúc”

"The river has bends; people have times"
A Vietnamese saying about the ebb and flow of life's circumstances.

The Road North:

We are unaware of the moment we lose ourselves. It happens slowly, gradually, like little pieces of marble being chipped away, sculpting something unrecognizable from what was once whole. And like a statue, we stagnate, frozen, unable to move. But sometimes, a moment, a spark, a gesture will remind us of who we once were.
To rekindle what we loved about life, what made our hearts beat.

There are no trains, there are no flights, so the journey to Ha Giang began with a long, restless bus ride from Hanoi. In total around 12 hours over two buses. It was packed, the narrow sleeping berths designed more for cargo than comfort. I wedged myself in, trying to find a position that didn't contort my spine into something unnatural. The girl next to me spent the entire ride coughing up loogies, hacking them into a little plastic bag, the kind street vendors serve soda in. And with methodical precision, she continued, for hours. By the time the journey neared its end, she casually tied a knot in the bag, and flung it out the window, at least 250ml of bodily fluids soaring into the curb like an offering to the gods of the roadside. *SPLAT* – I turned away, suppressing my disaproval and counting the minutes until I could move freely.



The Ha Giang Loop wasn't an untraveled route, quite the opposite during certain times of the year, but it was the hundreds of quiet side roads I was looking forward to exploring. I set off from the town of Ha Giang early in the morning, the engine of my bike huming, creating untangable excitement within. Around 2 hours later, I was swallowed by the landscape, emerald rice terraces stacked against limestone cliffs, rivers winding like silver ribbons through the valley floor. Children ran after me as I passed through their villages. Bare feet kicking up dust, voices chasing me down the road. Attemping to keep up on push bikes. *Such interactions of simplicity reminded me why I travel.*

The first day was an ascent, higher and higher, the road coiling up the mountainside like a snake. There was no room for mistakes; one wrong turn, one moment of distraction, and you'd be swallowed by the abyss below. The evidence was everywhere, scattered bike parts at the edges of sharp turns, fresh skid marks that ended where the world simply fell away.
I saw a few wrecked bikes being pulled from ravines by villagers, men working together as they had a hundred times before. The road had no sympathy for carelessness. Villages perched on impossibly steep slopes, they're wooden houses clinging to the mountainside. Women in traditional dress walked along the roadside, their baskets overflowing with harvest. Each town had its own rhythm, its own economy.
I stopped frequently, how could I not, drawn in by their people, their way of life untouched by urgency.

At a bustling roadside market, I wandered between stalls bursting with color, embroidered fabrics, fresh herbs, dried chilies, and baskets of fruit that looked like they had been plucked straight from a rainbow. A stall between garment sellers caught my attention, a shelve lined with coloring books and bright, rainbow-colored markers. I bought a handful, stuffing them into my bag, unsure of who they were for but certain they would find a home in the hands of the friendly locals.

Later that afternoon, passing though a village that I cant recall by name, nor by map, I met a group of children playing on the path-side. They eyed me at first, peeking from behind their mothers' skirts and boulders that lined the road. But when I pulled out the coloring books and markers, their wariness melted into smiles. They pounced on them, flipping through the pages with wide eyes, running their fingers over the pages as if they were made of magic. Soon, they were sprawled across the ground, lost in their creations, giggling as they showed each other their work. I sat nearby, at a small concrete cube that was the village cafe, sipping overly sweet Vietnamese coffee, condensed milk mixed with a black elixir strong enough to run my motorbike on. The sun began to dip behind the mountains and I watched as the dull afternoon light was replaced with the warm glow of a day well spent. .

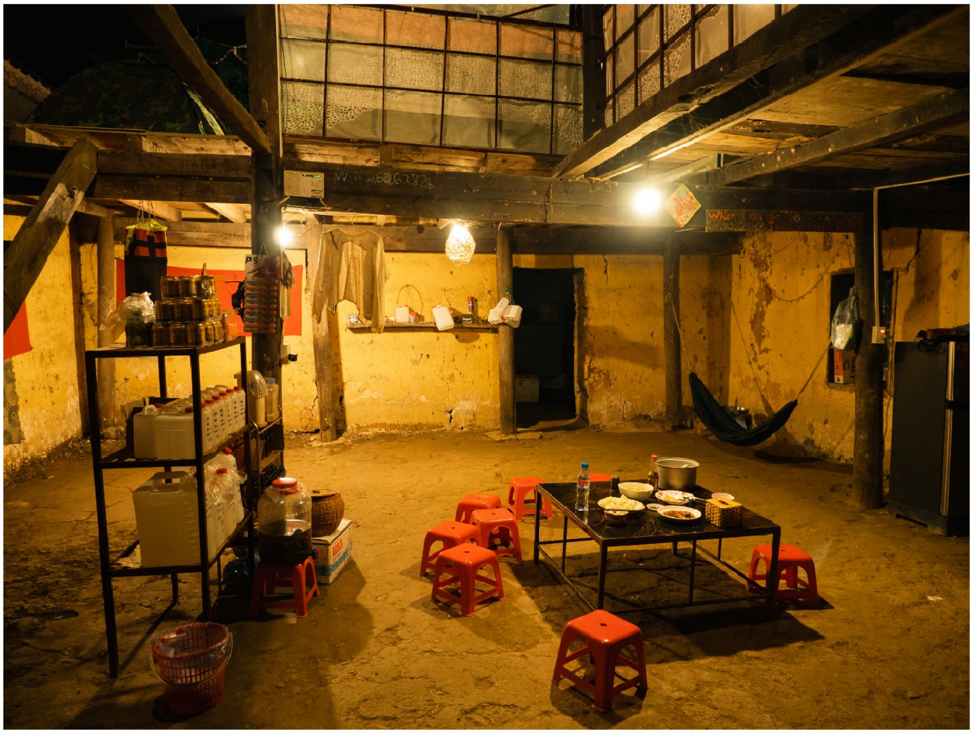
That night, I stayed at a home stay nestled in a valley run by a Hmong family. In the courtyard, the evening unfolded like a festival of life and community. It was a Friday night. Locals arrived in their finest traditional clothes, each patterned garment woven with history and tradition. Around a long wooden table, laughter reigned supreme. Homemade rice wine flowed, passed from hand to hand, warming from the inside out. The air smelled of roasted pork, charred vegetables, and smoke curling into the night. Plans dissolved, such as an early night, replaced by the easy pull of company. In these moments, time stretched, it blurred, becoming something less urgent, less structured and unnecessary.

The women, busy, eternally filling my plate. The men, urging, nudging my ribs to take shots of whiskey.

The next day, I pushed further north, toward the border of China. The villages grew smaller, the roads quieter and although more dangerous, they became so much more spectacular. Gravel patches flung across the road by bored kids kept you sharp, as they watched from up the hill for the foreigner to slide out on there booby traps. Then, a road, barely wider than two bikes, cut into the side of a mountain, leading straight up to the sky. It felt sketchy, and you had to commit as there was nowhere to turn around. The engine groaning beneath me, tires shooting out loose stones. The drop-off beside me was absolute, a sheer fall into the valley. But I kept steady, higher and higher,
until finally, the world opened up.

At the summit, I killed the engine. Silence. Nothing but the wind moving through the valley, whispering through the brush. Below me, the mountains rolled endlessly into the horizon, there, peaks kissed by the last warm light of day. The river far below glowed gold, cutting through the valley like a molten vein. I sat there, cracked open a can of Sprite, and breathed it all in, watching as the sun dipped lower, until the sky was nothing but fire and shadow.

I stayed until darkness settled around me, until the cold crept in, until there was nothing left but the stars.
Then, with an abundance of gratitude for making it to the top, I realized I should've left when there was still light. I turned the key and began the descent. The road was a different beast in the dark. My headlight barely cut through the black, the abyss at my side now an unseen pull. It was just me, the engine's steady hum, and the smell of brake pads being worn far to quickly. Painfully squealing at me with every pull on the brakes. There was something about it though, riding alone through the night, your world reduced to the small pool of light ahead, the knowledge that I was still moving, pushing forward, physically drained but still, happy being within the unknown. It was a feeling not experienced for far too long.



The following day I stopped frequently. Every Hmong village had its own little market where only life's necessities were sold. I drunk enough Vietnamese coffee to give me the shits and the shakes. Another the reason for frequent stopping.

I reached the intended village by late afternoon, my bones feeling rattled from the ride thus far. The home stay was simple, a wooden house on stilts, just timber and clay with a ton of charm. My host, a middle aged woman who lived alone, her son had moved to the city so she replaced the quiet with guests looking for a different type of experience rather than aircon & appetizers.

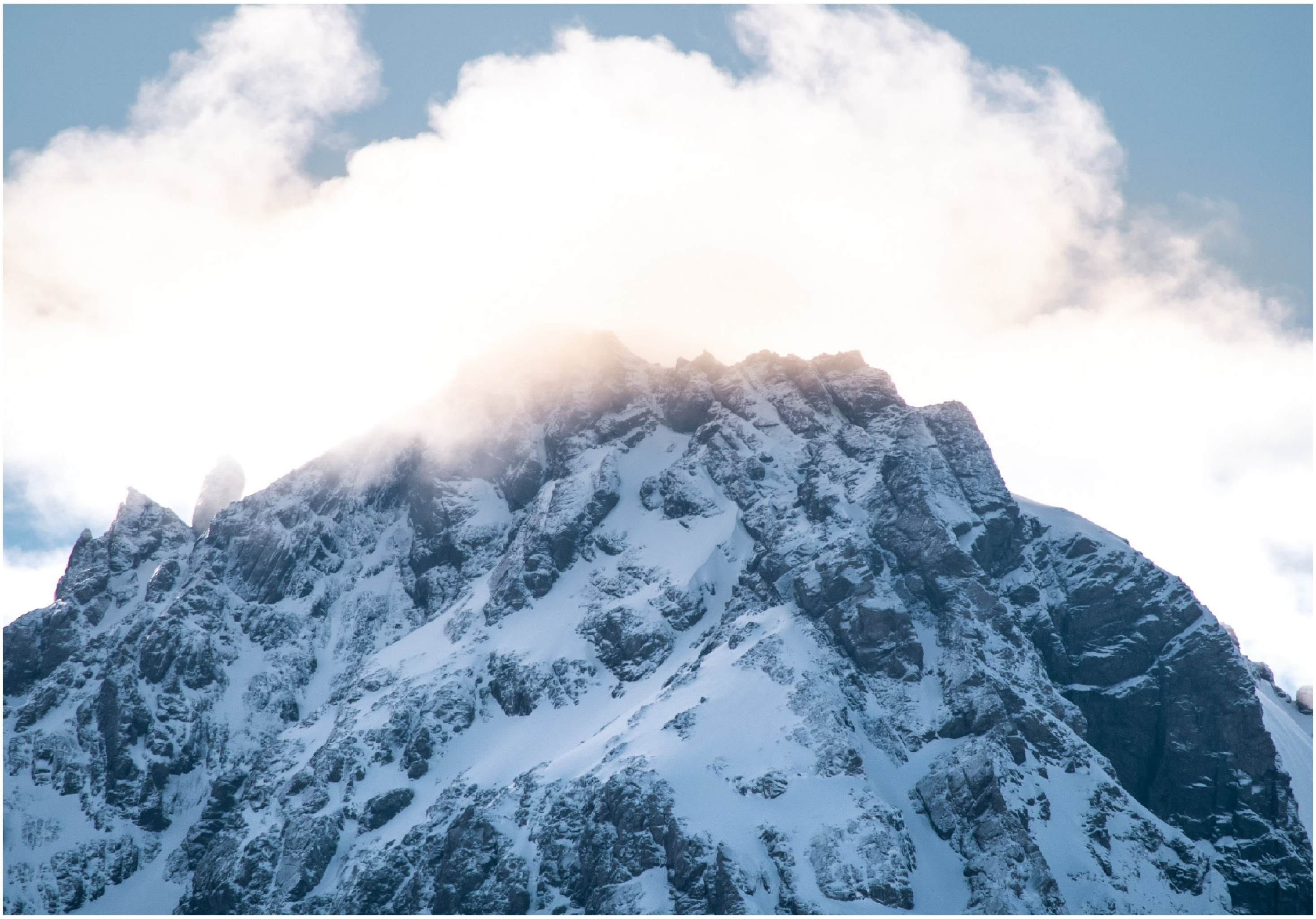
She greeted me with a smile, her hands at the ready with ingredients. She spoke no English, but we worked it all out with gestures. She led me inside, where the smell of honey-glazed pork filled the air. The feed was a something else, tender meat, rich sauce, sautéed vegetables, fragrant rice. She sat with me and we ate in silence, the kind that comes not from awkwardness but from mutual understanding.

Just a stone's throw outside, I showered beneath a banana tree, the shower head gravity fed and zip-tied to its trunk. A few loose paver's underfoot, a million stars above. More character than any marble clad hotel.

I sat awake for a while after she had gone to bed, listening to the quiet hum of the village, reading notes from other travelers scribbled on the wall. I didn't see her, but she had left me a pot of tea by my indoor tent and I couldn't help but be a little overwhelmed by her caring nature and hospitality.

Its ALWAYS those with less that want to give more.

Later, the night was thick with stars, the mountains silhouetted against the sky and somewhere in the distance, a river murmured, carrying this day passed downstream. I realized, then, that something had shifted. A trickle of fuel came back, something too long dormant. It wasn't just the landscapes or the roads or the people. It was the act of moving, of being untethered, of watching the imperfect world and its people unfold with nothing but a thousand paths ahead, and a comfort found where abundance lay bare.



Routeburn Saddle, New Zealand:

It was late May, just before winter truly set in on New Zealand's South Island. The day before had been bleak, the whole trail wrapped in cloud, a steady drizzle soaking everything. You couldn't see the peaks, only a soft, white eternity of nothingness. Everything was wet. As I climbed higher, I found myself hoping the rain would at least turn to snow, easier to deal with. I reached the Lake Hut around 2:30 PM. Inside, a dozen hikers were playing cards and sipping warm IPA. Sometimes Im happy for social circles, trade stories and play some cards, but not out here. The noise, the snoring, the company… not always a welcome.

I had my hiking tent buried in my rucksack and figured I'd take the solitude, even if it meant more cold. I knew the next hut was hours beyond reach, so I committed to the tent. Near the Harris Saddle, the highest point of the multi-day trek, the trail split. One fork led down to the end of the hike, the other toward a nearby day trip summit. I veered off, tucked my little tent against the side of some boulders, and prepared for a night on stone. The wind picked up. The dark arrived quickly. The cold intensified. Dinner was a bread roll stuffed with butter and slices of cheese, such a comfort out here. I wore every layer I had, cocooned in wool and synthetic blends inside a knock-off North Face sleeping bag made for summer, not Southland winters.

Sleeping in a freezing tent is strange, not quite dreaming, not quite awake. Just a cycle of tossing, turning, discomfort, and an overwhelming desire for morning to arrive. You pray that you dont need to take a piss. Then brace yourself for the worst, wet, fog, grey. But this morning, when I unzipped the tent, a foot of snow surrounded me and the sky sat clear. A few clouds drifted lazily above, pierced by pockets of blue. *And in front of me, this view. Lit from behind by the rising sun and well worth the shitty sleep.*

Lanterns of Saigon:

The city moves, even in its quietest alleys.
Down below, a woman locks her stall, stacking plastic stools in neat towers. A motorbike hums past, slow and unhurried, its rider balancing market wares, the scent of gasoline and smoke lingering in the warm night air.

I lean against the worn wooden railing,
watching lanterns shift in the breeze –
silk stretched over bamboo frames, painted by hands that knew patience. Red, ochre, deep cobalt, their glow flickering against cracked plaster, against the soft green of plants, leaves stretching toward the streetlight's haze.

The pots are imperfect, chipped at the edges,
some from alleyway markets, others left behind by past inhabitants.

Life finds a way to bloom here, even in broken things.

The alley breathes below me, a living thing.
Through half-open windows, I catch glimpses –
a child curled beside a flickering television,
an old man stirring a pot, his face golden in the dim kitchen light.

Saigon is a million lives stacked on top of each other,
folded into alleyways, whispered between doorways,
woven through the hum of fans and the clatter of woks.

A radio plays somewhere, an old Vietnamese love song floating through the dark. A cat perches on a tin roof, its tail flicking in slow rhythm. The world stretches wide beyond this moment, beyond this street.

TABLE FOR ONE:

How often, in your hometown or country, do you go out for dinner alone?
An easy stroll down the street to a casual setting, sitting outside under palm trees or giant umbrellas, casual dining, a laminated menu with pictures so you know what you're in for. Sitting out in a courtyard with fresh air, a direct line of sight into the kitchen. And how often, if or when you have done this, do you end up in the company of others? Another loner, a family of locals, other travelers. It's something that seems absent in Western cultures.

I get asked sometimes, as I prefer solo travel: "Do you ever get lonely?" ... Never.

I think food is a pleasure that knows no borders, race, religion, or appearance. It is a beautiful thing, a nourishing thing that we can finally all agree on. For me, dinner has always been my main meal of the day. A coffee or eggs to get me going in the morning, rarely a proper lunch, just enough to keep the hunger at bay. And during travel, I'm usually too occupied during the day to be bothered. But dinner... it's a ritual for me, a religion. A shower to wash away the dirt of the day, thongs slipped on, and a wander down the main street of a quiet town. A town somewhere in India or Asia and for me, the smaller, the better. The more locals, the better. It always baffles me that in a town with five little family-run places to eat, usually, one is packed with Westerners while the other four are empty. I actually find it an odd affair that we plan, save, and travel so far across oceans, catching buses and trains to far-off exotic places, only to choose a restaurant similar to home and based on how many people, *just like us*, are sitting inside.

Many times, I've been the first to sit at a table somewhere, and I tell you, in countries where the entire family relies on the income of their restaurant, when you walk in, smile, say hello in the local language the best you can and ask, "Can I have dinner here?" their reaction is sometimes a reward greater than the tasty food itself. Peanuts and a cold beer are rushed to the table, and usually, as you're the only person there, they will sit and have a chat. The kindest of women, ready to give you sustenance and a bit of company. And to be honest, some of the most peaceful moments of my life happen at this point of the evening. The sun recently set, a few people walking the street, perusing each eatery with a curious glance, kids riding up and down the street on pushbikes. A peace that comes with the end of a productive workday.

Shortly, here it comes, the nourishment. The plate, the absolutely foreign and delicious food. Nothing defrosted, nothing from a bag, nothing shrink-wrapped, nothing unnatural, just from the earth to the table, with a ton of herbs, spices, and flavors that sends you senses into overdrive.

Fluffy steamed jasmine rice is a staple, the perfect accompaniment to anything. Vegetables from the surrounding fields, swimming in a salty broth to partner the rice. Then, a bowl of fresh chili and mint-infused curry. A plate of stir-fried pork and cashews topped with basil picked from the potted plants at the entrance. A bamboo skewer filled with capsicum, beef, and halloumi, with a side of thick satay dipping sauce at the ready. A banana leaf wrapped around chicken thighs infused with lemon sauce and black pepper. Or a slow-cooked tandoori, all prepared over open coals or flame.

Sustenance and derived pleasure, a universal language, a love letter of its own.

Other travelers pass by, eyeing the empty tables, just as un-keen as I am for the busier dining experience. Their eyes wander to my plate… "How is the food here?" They stop, looking around, deciding if this is the place for them. I respond with enthusiasm. *"Fucking brilliant."*

You feel the owner watching from afar, curious about my response to other potential customers, as this could be the difference between a quiet night or a (wishful) busy night. And when they walk in and sit down with a smile and a hello, you can feel her happiness, you can see her pride. It's something empaths are very aware of and pick up on, while to others, its a foreign concept. Soon enough, others who are more comfortable in a quiet corner than a busy bar occupy the seats. A sister, a husband, or a cousin comes to her aid, preparing dishes in the open-air kitchen, washing leeks and lettuce in bowls of water, chopping meat with cleavers, or popping the lids off cold lagers. And with this, the children of the family begin wandering through the tables, curious about these unusual-looking people from lands afar.

"Hello," they wave, repeating, "Hello," practicing their English, climbing up onto empty chairs across from you, examining your features that differ from their own. Or watching when travelers with their own children of similar age come in. Kids from both parties silent at first, analyzing their external differences, but so very quickly recognizing their similarities. Then soon enough, a table of three, with more food on the tablecloth than in the bowl, coloring books out to impress one another, no screens in sight, and generally having the time of their lives making a happy mess. A sight that gives immense hope for future generations.

By now, the owner and I have some rapport, smiles and pats on the back as she zigzags through the patrons. She's busy, and she's happy. Then, soon enough, the once-empty eatery becomes just as busy as the one down the road. At the counter, built of bamboo and pine, I settle the bill, hand-scribbled with a smiley face. And upon conversion to Australian dollars, I realize it reads a grand total of $7.

Myanmar From Above:

From the plane window, the Irrawaddy looks like it's been poured from a shmelt, curving, splitting, folding itself across the land like a reflective ribbon. Down below, Myanmar stretches in patchwork: farmland, temples, scrub, politics, poverty, riverbeds & tarmac cutting through this ancient Burmese empire. I'm flying into a country that constantly shifts, and having visited its neighbors on either side, this place stands alone in its unsettled nature by comparison. It's my first time here, and already it feels a little unresolved. Like you've just walked into a room where an argument was recent.

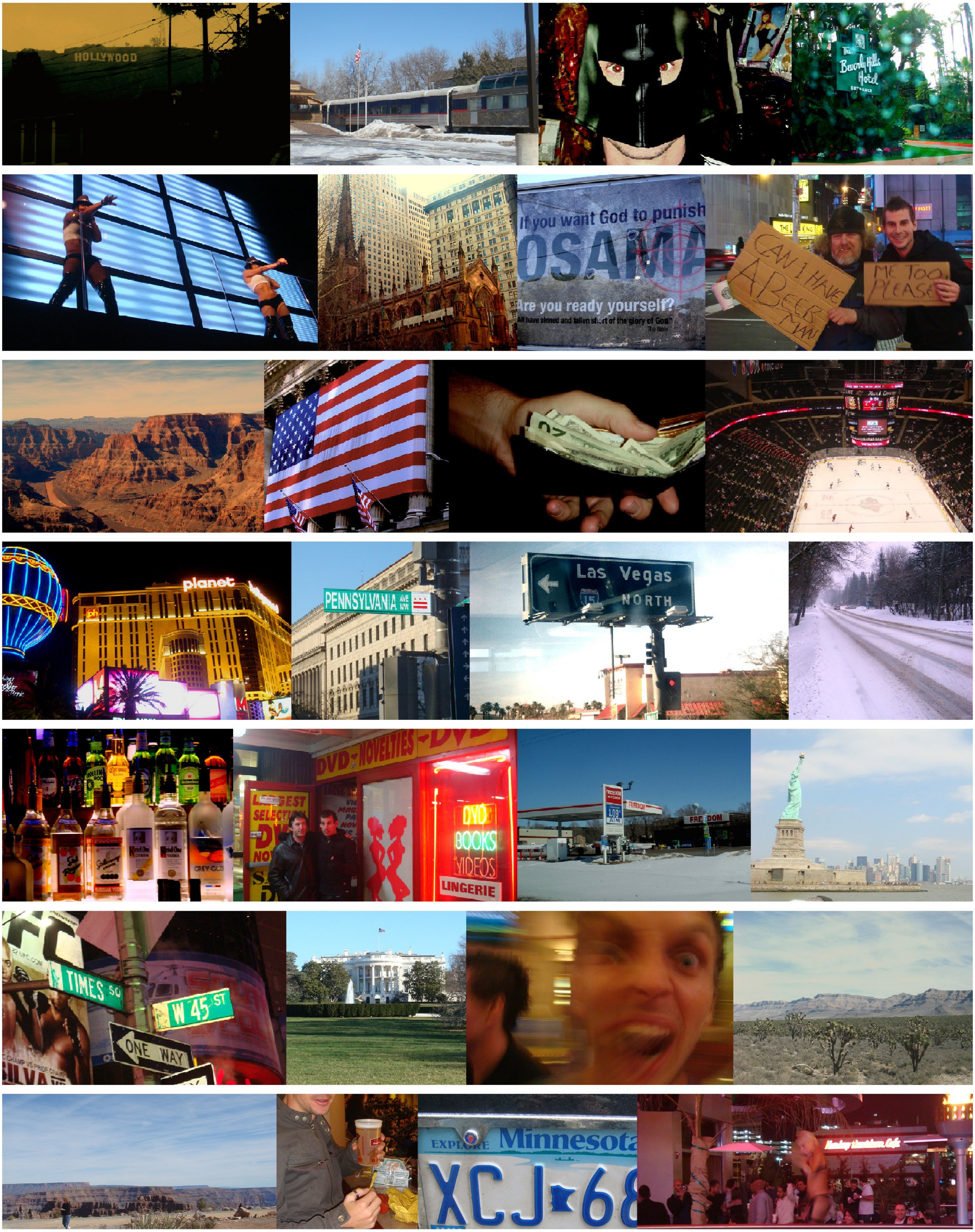
The landing in Yangon is rough, one of those tense-your-ass-cheeks runways, with cracks that thump as the rubber blasts over them. I step off the plane and into a wall of soupy heat. Immigration is slow but polite. There's an old poster peeling off the wall near baggage claim that reads: "Welcome to the Golden Land." A country with a name that's been rewritten more than once, Burma, Myanmar, back and forth like a divorce settlement. A place trying to move forward while still dragging history like an anchor.

Outside the airport, the roads swell with cars decades behind and motorbikes that duck and dive like insects. I flag down a taxi with a cracked rear windscreen. The driver doesn't speak much English, but he smiles and doesn't try to take me to his cousins tailor shop. A win for anyone stepping of the plane in this part of the world. He just chain-smokes as we head into the depths of the city. We pass military trucks on the road. Not unusual here. The army's everywhere, visible and invisible. Billboards of generals, faded and sun-bleached, hang beside food stalls selling mohinga. This is a country still recovering from its own history. The coup broke something that wasn't quite fixed to begin with. I'd read about it before coming, how journalists and educators are jailed, how internet blackouts are common, how hope gets traded on the black market like currency. But on the street, life keeps moving. Slowly, stubbornly. People adapt because they must.

I check into a budget guesthouse. There's a fan that clicks with every rotation and a bucket shower with cool water at the end of the hall. I leave my bag on the single bed and head back out. I don't want to waste daylight. By late afternoon, I'm in downtown Yangon, walking past cracked colonial buildings covered in vines and rust. Once-grand banks, hotels, trading offices, all now home to pigeons and ghosts. I sip a beer at a plastic table and watch it all go by. A million lives. The people disappear with intent as tasks move quick on the chaotic streets. Night comes fast, and with it, the scent of charcoal, fish sauce, and incense. I buy a skewer of grilled pork and chew slowly as the street darkens. Not too many other tourists in sight. No expat cafés or golden arches. Just the sound of slippers on pavement and the clatter of pots from behind half closed doors.

Hardly anyone comes here to explore it. Not properly at least. Maybe a border run, a temple ticked off, but most skip it. Maybe it's fear. Or confusion. Or maybe it's just too far off the backpacker trail to bother with. But for those who do come, who stay a little longer than a Yangon stopover, there's something here that feels incredibly rare: an un-westernised un-influenced country, still moving to its traditional rhythm, untouched by Starbucks signage and algorithm-fed travel guides.

And the strange part is, it has everything. The north nearly brushes the Far East Himalaya, with snow-covered peaks that just miss out on the fame of Everest's neighbors. The south stretches deep into Thai waters, scattered with postcard islands that no one ever seems to post. And at its heart lie the temples of Bagan, an ancient wonder in every sense but name, left off the official lists not for lack of awe, but because politics kept it hidden. And cheap? Your dollar here goes twice as far as it does in Vietnam or Thailand. I don't know why it's yet to become a mecca for travelers. But lucky for me, I got to experience not just a town, but an entire country that's still managed to avoid the gloss and noise of over-tourism. No herds of Chinese tour buses, no drunk Aussies shouting through the night, no selfie-stick pandemics or Israeli backpackers haggling a poor taxi driver over the equivalent of a dollar. Myanmar is still figuring itself out, it citizens standing tall, with all its cracks showing. A place that moves to the uninfluenced beat of its own slow, stubborn drum.


HOLLYWOOD
The Beverly Hills Hotel
ENTRANCE
If you want God to punish
OSAMA
Are you ready yourself?
All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"
The Bible
CAN I HAVE A BEER MAN
ME TOO PLEASE
planet hollywood
PENNSYLVANIA AVE NW
Las Vegas
15
NORTH
DVD NOVELTIES DVD
LARGEST SELECTION DVD NOW
DVD
BOOKS
VIDEOS
LINGERIE
FREEDOM
TIMES SQ
W 45 ST
ONE WAY
EXPLORE Minnesota
XCJ 68

America 2008 (already a decade too late)

America isn't one story. It's a thousand, all stitched together through roadside motels, the smell of hamburgers and stale piss clinging to the curbs. It's neon signs humming above empty highways or dive bars, and flags flapping over pawn shops and liquor stores. It's loud, it's unashamed, it burns itself into your memory whether you want it to or not.

Some nights bled into mornings. In Vegas, we stumbled out of casinos at 5 a.m: the carpet patterns burned into our retinas, pockets lighter and heads heavier. We drank whiskey from plastic cups, cheering for strangers who were losing just as badly as we were winning. The air reeked of desperation, hairspray, and hope, all equally flammable. Somewhere between the flashing lights and the all-you-can-eat buffets, we decided sleep was optional.

Out on the highways, the country stretched itself thin, endless plains giving way to mountains, then deserts, then forests. In Minnesota, frozen lakes mirrored the sky and we drank in Legion halls, walking through knee-deep snow and killing time in front of cozy fireplaces. Most waved with that quiet Midwestern solidarity, like they saw the same things we did.

Washington D.C. was all marble and muscle, monuments pretending their history was acceptable, politicians pretending to have morals. We wandered the museums, heads tilted back at towering stone giants built to house ghosts of history.

New York was a different animal, always loud, rough, and unapologetically alive. The streets were slick with last night's rain and yesterday's trash, cabs honking like angry geese, steam curling up from subway grates. We ate one-dollar slices on sidewalks, elbows brushing strangers from other parts of the world. In bars that never closed, we drank cheap booze and listened to jazz that caused headaches and made the whole city feel like it was on edge, still clawing at something just out of reach, unlike the rats that gorged on pizza crusts.

Somewhere in all of this mess, America showed its beauty, hidden not in its polish but in its cracks. The waitress who called everyone "honey." The couple on their honeymoon you shared a drink with. The skyline at dusk when even Los Angeles shut up for a second.

The days blurred as we ventured and drank our way from coast to coast, Pacific to Atlantic, city to city, bar to bar. From dive joints in L.A. to Irish pubs in New York, we filled shot glasses like fuel tanks and let the confidence carry us through city streets. We slept in motels and woke to sunlight bleeding through cigarette-stinking curtains. Our jeans stayed dirty, our mouths dry, our stories half-remembered. We were just chasing a taste of something different from home, something exciting, all with the fire of youth. In every city, behind every face, under every streetlight, across the Lower 48, we barely scratched the surface.

Luxor, EGYPT *“Smoke, Shutters, and Shadow Markets”*

This is back-alley Luxor. Metal shutters drawn down. Fluorescent tubes flickering. The air stinks of old onions and motor oil. Someone’s burning cardboard. Probably to cook tea. Boys pushing crates. Men yelling in Arabic (presumable) about wares. Women negotiating fresh veggies and a cat perched on a crate like it owns the block. This is Egypt breathing, cursing, hustling, selling you a knockoff with one hand and a cigarette with the other.

New York City, AMERICA *“Noise Stacked on Noise”*

From above, New York. Buildings jammed shoulder to shoulder. No logic. No gaps. Just ambition in concrete form. Zoom in and it’s chaos with rhythm. Sirens harmonising with subway rumbles. A delivery guy threading a bike through a crowd, pigeons doing recon over 5th Ave. A guy with a sandwich yelling at no one in particular. Everything here is fucking urgent. Everyone’s running. But no one’s going far. Just spinning within the gravity of a wheel that never stops. Or shuts up.

Saigon, VIETNAM *“Boom Boom’s”*

Beneath the streets, under the buzz of scooters and iced coffee stalls, are concrete lungs of history. The tunnels start low and go lower. Ventilation shafts the size of soup cans. Doors disguised as tiled floors. Rooms like this one, claustrophobic and humid enough to make your sweat. You crouch because the ceiling won’t let you stand. Bomb casings, hand grenades and explosives stacked in corners. Handmade traps that say:

“We will out-think your firepower.”

El Nido, THE PHILIPPINES *“Salty Skin & Soft Sands”*

The kind of beach that sells itself before the boat even docks. Limestone cliffs like ancient teeth guarding a lagoon carved by time and typhoons. Kids cannonball off outriggers. Dogs nap in the sand. Someone’s playing karaoke at 10 a.m. and no one complains. You walk the shore and the water plays tricks, clearer than air, warm as bathwater.

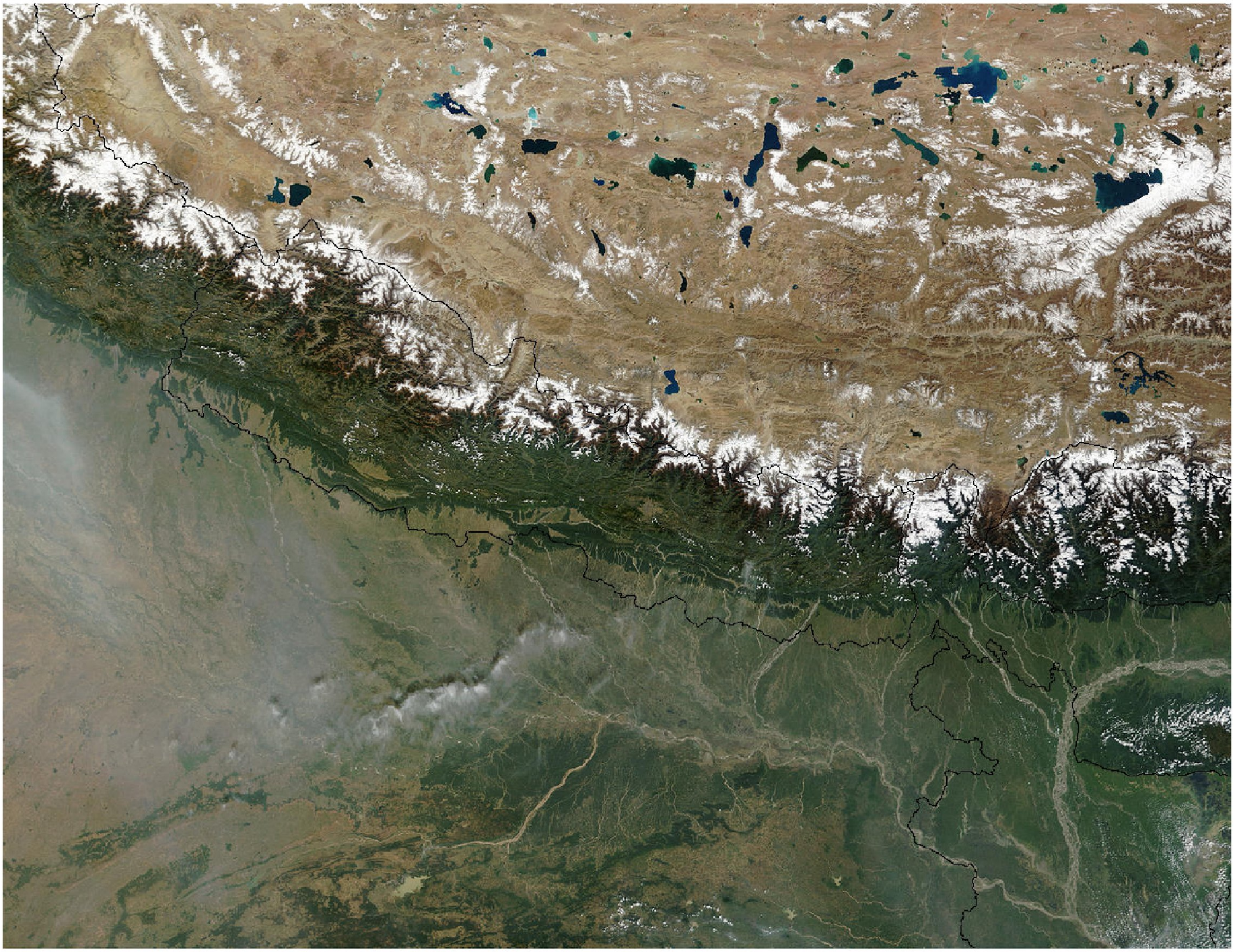
“Is it possible to outrun your demons?
Probably not, so we best aim to live a life so full
that they can’t fit within it.: Or at least make them tired chasing us”

Fjordland National Park –NEW ZEALAND 2019

Annapurna Region

The Himalayas of Nepal:

Annapurna Region (Nepal)



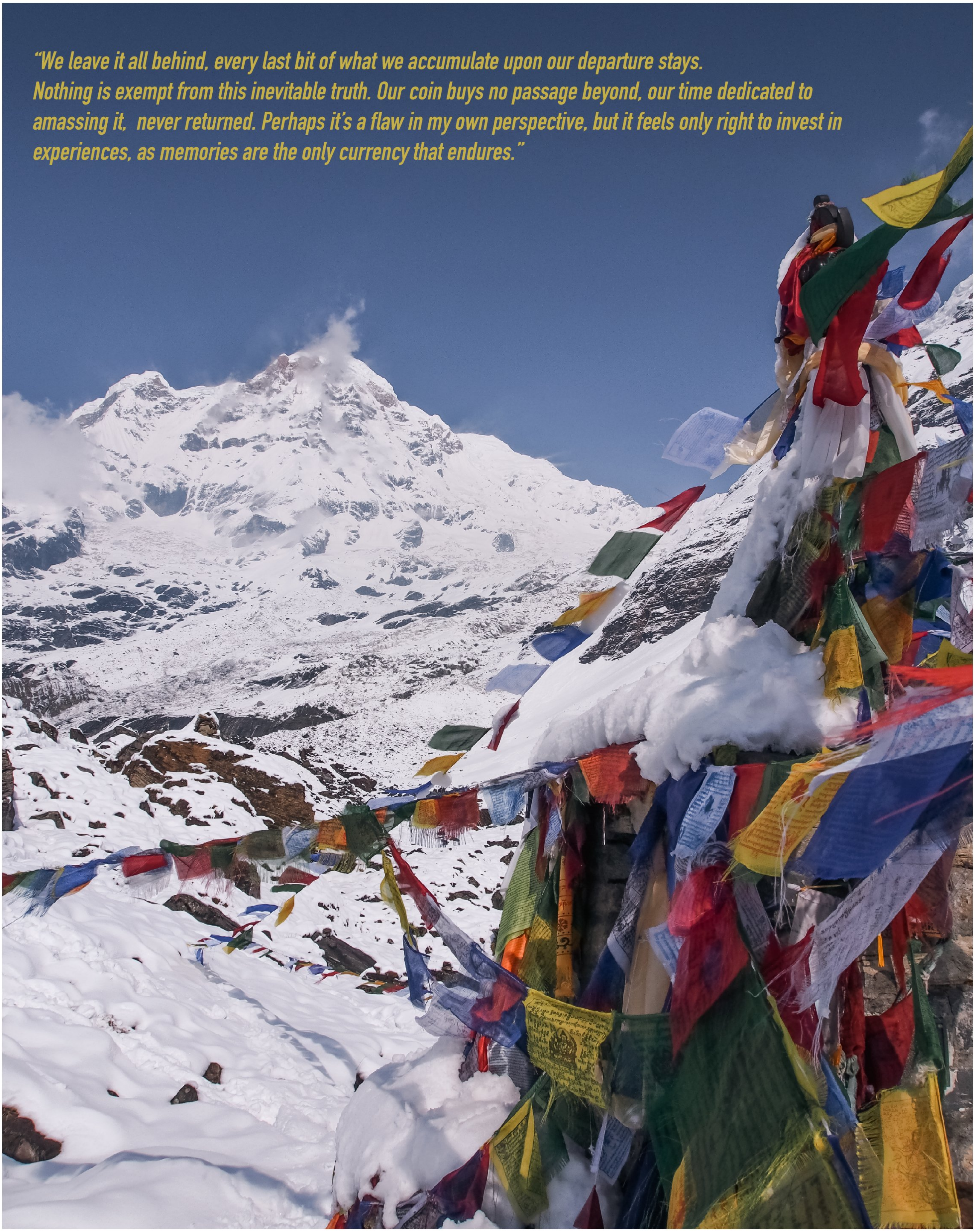
28.5961° N, / 83.8203° E

“हात्ती आयो, पुल छैन।”

“Hatti aayo, pul chhaina”

"The elephant has come, but there is no bridge"

A Nepali proverb highlighting unpreparedness in the face of significant events.



"We leave it all behind, every last bit of what we accumulate upon our departure stays. Nothing is exempt from this inevitable truth. Our coin buys no passage beyond, our time dedicated to amassing it, never returned. Perhaps it's a flaw in my own perspective, but it feels only right to invest in experiences, as memories are the only currency that endures."

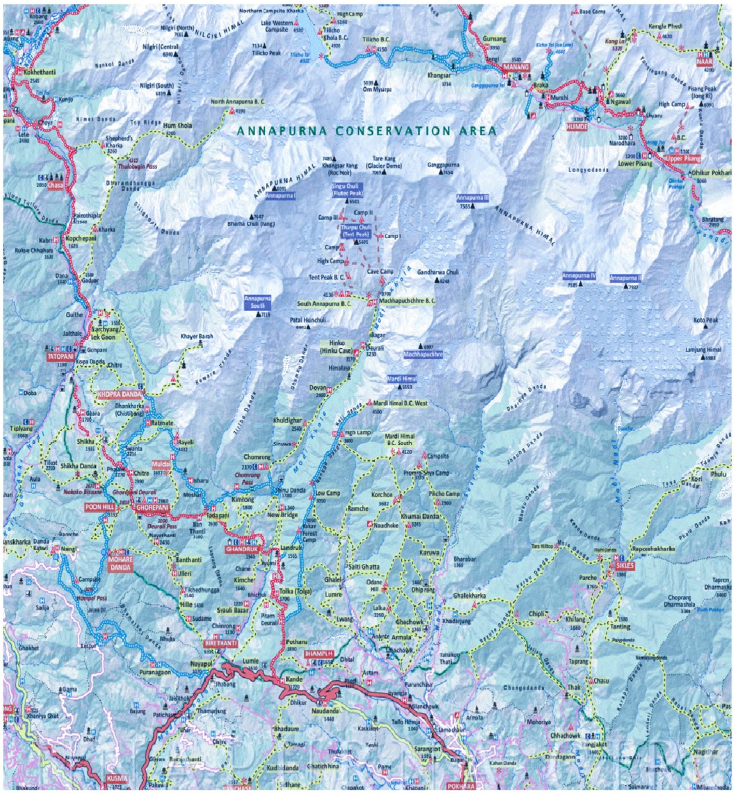
Annapurna, NEPAL:

I awoke long before dawn in excitement, the chill of the air already seeping into my bones. The cold was bitter, it gnawed at you, but there was an undeniable magic to this place. I lay still for a moment, absorbing the quiet, before reluctantly unzipping my sleeping bag and stepping out into the frost-laden morning.

The night had been bitterly cold, almost made your bones ache, but the morning was crisp and made you feel every bit alive. The sky was an impossibly deep shade of blue, fading into the soft pinks and purples of dawn. The faintest light of the sun brushed the tips of the mountain peaks far in the distance, their jagged, snow-covered tops piercing the sky like swords guarding a world long forgotten by modern times. I was a mere speck of existence in their shadow, magnifying the fragility of our lives and our own insignificance. The Himalayas has an undeniable presence. They were not just mountains; they were a physical representation of life and death, creation and destruction in its slowest form.

Pokhara to Tikhedhunga:

As I prepared to leave Pokhara that morning, I walked to the lake's edge. The water mirrored the towering peaks perfectly. The world above reflected below. The stillness mesmerizing, its surface undisturbed except for the occasional ripple from a lone bird taking flight. I lingered, sipping a bitter coffee, watching the elderly do their group exercise. The town was just beginning to stir. Fishermen readied their boats, markets began set-up, street dogs began to rise, their silhouettes dark against the pavement from the peering sun.



The homestay owner, an older man with an ease about himself, gave me a ride on his motorbike to the trailhead. The ride of around an hour was a blur of roads, rocks, and rustling foliage as we headed into the mountains. Then, the valley opened up before us, a massive expanse of green fields and swaying pines. I could see the mist of the early morning rising from the valley, the sun turning dark and grey walls of ice into sparkling giants of fire orange.

At the trailhead, I was armed with a map, a map that quickly proved more of a suggestion. The village trails were winding and narrow, without signs or markers. Just dirt paths leading from one tiny settlement to another. The people here didn't need maps. They knew every rock, every tree, every turn. They had lived in these hills for generations, navigating by instinct and memory. I, however, was an outsider, and the landscape was both enchanting, daunting and disorienting.

The first day's hike headed straight up, passing through lush forests and terraced fields before reaching Tikhedhunga, a small village nestled in the hills. The village was tiny, just a handful of houses and a few teahouses catering to trekkers. I found lodging in a modest teahouse where a fire burned low in the common area, fueled by yak dung, its earthy scent filling the room. Over steaming cups of ginger tea, I spoke with the owner, a woman sporting the most colorful outfit in the town.

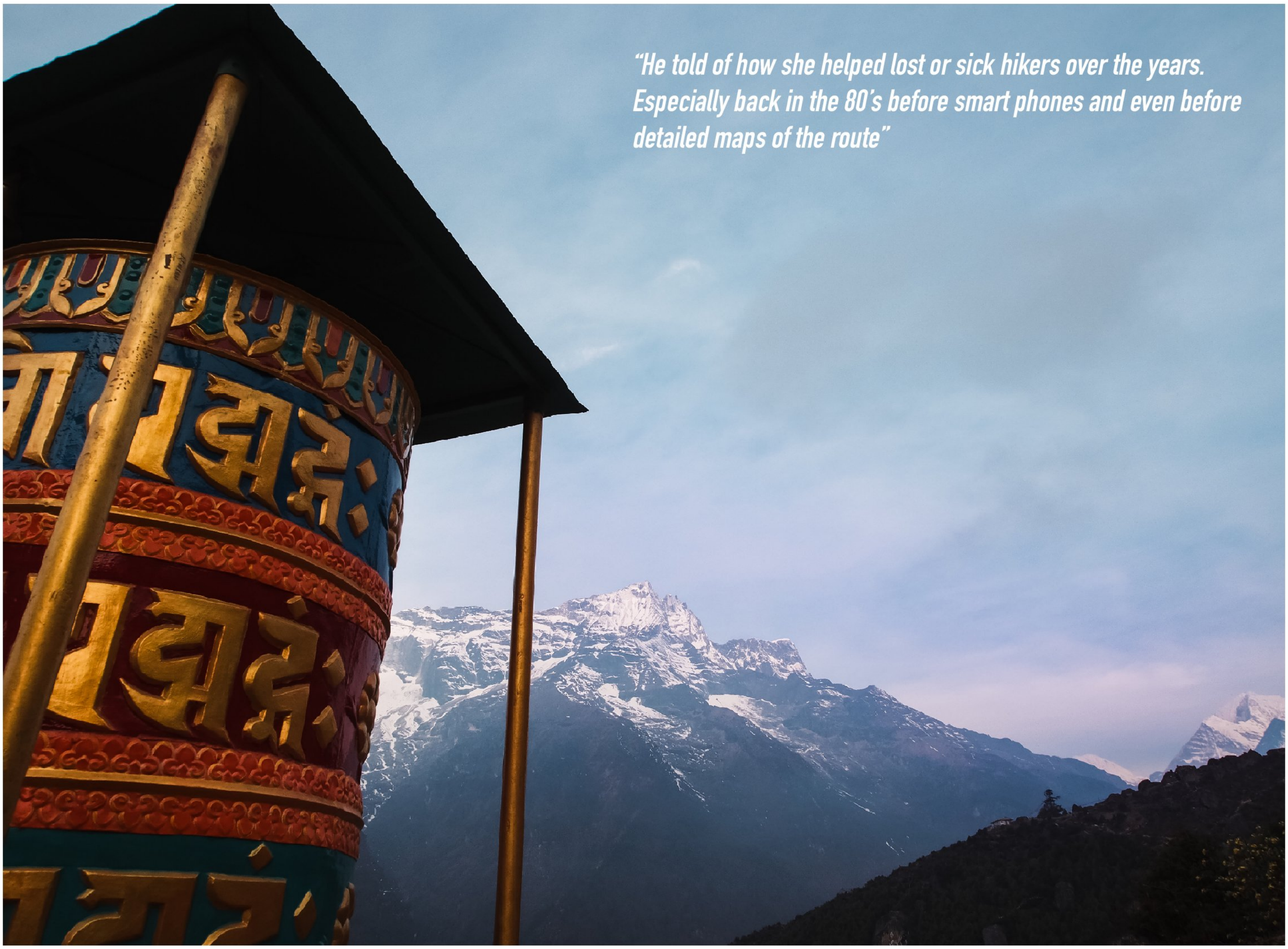
"Tomorrow, Ulleri steps," she said with a knowing nod, referring to the steep stone staircase that awaited me. I nodded back, already feeling the burn of the notorious climb ahead.

Tikhedhunga to Ghorepani:

The morning arrived with a chill, and I set off early to avoid a potential congo line of trekkers climbing the steps. The ascent was relentless, each stone step seeming to mock my determination. My thighs burned with every move, and my breath came in ragged gasps. Up, up, up, only to be met with more up. Breakfast before this was 4 boiled eggs, so between the gasps came sulfurous burps of boiled bird. The higher I climbed, the more the landscape shifted. The greenery thinned, replaced by rhododendron forests. The colors seemingly magnified against the ever present white giants in the sky.

By midday, I was drenched in sweat despite the cool air. My legs trembled with exhaustion, as the higher I went, the thinner the air became. I could feel it, being from sea level my whole life, my lungs were working harder, my heart pounding in volumes with every breath. Thump Thump… Thump Thump…
I caught glimpses of Machapuchare, the sacred "Fishtail" mountain, its distinctive peak slicing through the sky like a knife. I had seen mountains before, but this was a sight of something else. Its untamed sharp walls towered high over everything, as it became everything, to just sit and look up in awe.

The days where never just about reaching Annapurna, as always, its the unexpected encounters that make places unforgettable. After dunking in the waters under a log bridge to give my skin some respite after days spent under multiple layers of clothing, I had a conversation with two porters, the young men barely older than teenagers, there haul, massive and weighted. One of them was telling us about his mother, who had trekked these mountains her whole life.



"He told of how she helped lost or sick hikers over the years. Especially back in the 80's before smart phones and even before detailed maps of the route"

"Those stories, so simple, but obviously, stuck with me. The resilience of the mountain people, the quiet honor they carried. It wasn't part of our culture back home, where most actions expect a instant reward. It wasn't just the mountains that shaped them, but their commitment to one another, and to all living things."

By late afternoon, I arrived in Ghorepani, perched high above the valleys. The temperature had dropped significantly by then, and unless you were moving, you were always cold. Plus the air was definitely thinning. Its hard to translate, kind of like trying to breath while being bear hugged. The teahouse with its wooden walls offered scant protection against the growing cold. The fire crackled in the corner, and I sank into a seat by the stove, book in hand, unbelievably grateful for its warmth and entertainment by flame.

Ghorepani to Tadapani:

The morning began before dawn with a climb to Poon Hill, a vantage point renowned for its sunrise views. It was dark and the cold was sharp, waiting for the first light. *(At this point wondering if it would have been better to just sleep in)* Slowly, the mountains began to ignite, the peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri bathed in the golden light of dawn. It was one of those moments when the discomfort of the journey seemed to vanish into the light, and as I made my descent, I met an old Nepali man with a bent back who had trekked up the hill not for the views, but for a sunrise prayer. His wrinkled face was as weathered as the rocks beneath our feet, and his grin was the kind and toothless. He told me he had been among these mountains for his whole life, having being born right in this very village.

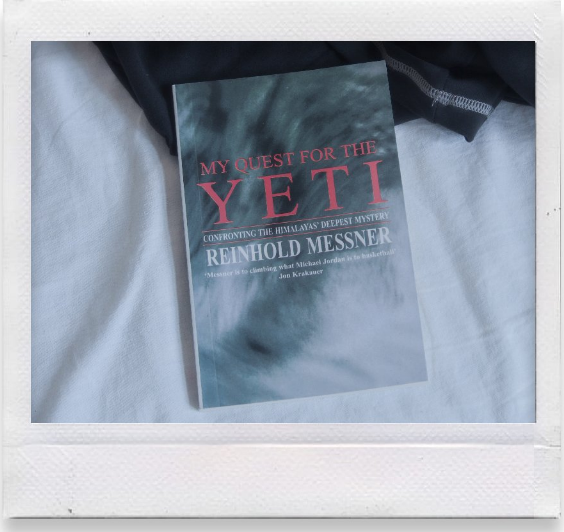
Upon decent I looked back, his hands together praying to whatever god he be believed was listening. Then, unexpectedly, he lit a cigarette and let out a massive plume of smoke into the icy sky. *Fuck...* I left my camera back at the tea house... would have been a good one.

I resumed my trek to Tadapani with the sharp feeling of raw flesh stinging my heals. Fucking blisters, they can ruin your week out here, especially when your only activity is to walk. And as to my ego, a mere hour later, I passed about a dozen children no older than 8 yrs old. They were barefoot... That put me to instant shame in my kit. Their clothes simple but colorful, and they skipped with a carefree energy that contrasted sharply with the laborious trek I was enduring. They giggled at the pale man wearing more clothes than all of them combined.

Chhomrong to Annapurna Base Camp:

The days blended into each other, a blur of steep ascents and knee-shaking descents. Each village was a small oasis in the vast wilderness, with tiny teahouses serving dal bhat, the staple meal of trekkers and guides alike.

As I reached Chhomrong, I could see the Annapurna Massif looming in the distance, its massive bulk a reminder there was still some effort ahead. The snow-capped peaks were both daunting and exhilarating. Each day, I inched closer, and the landscape transformed. The forest now a memory, giving way to alpine meadows, then rocky trails which lead into the looming ice.


MY QUEST FOR THE
YETI
CONFRONTING THE HIMALAYAS' DEEPEST MYSTERY
REINHOLD MESSNER
'Messner is to climbing what Michael Jordan is to basketball'
Jon Krakauer

You wake. You're cold. You walk. You drink water. You walk some more. You piss behind a tree. You eat a snickers. You drink more water. You walk. You climb stone steps. You shiver. You walk. You piss in a river. You eat dal bhat by a fire in a teahouse. You're cold. You sleep. You dream of walking in your dreams.

You wake again... and you continue like this... for days. What brings you all the way here to do this? The vision of the mountains? Do they pull you into their shadow?
If you feel it, you feel it. If not, that's not a bad thing, as they are your only respite and your only reward.

On the final night before reaching Annapurna Base Camp, snow began to fall. At first, it was light, just a dusting on the ground, Then as the evening progressed it took mere hours before the landscape changed into a dense whiteout. The black clouds swallowed the mountain peaks and a cold like never before crept in and captured everything in its path. I wandered the tiny village of barley 20 inhabitants and found all of them huddled around the stove of one of the guesthouse. My belly full with another feed of Dal Bhat as I begin the long attempt at slumber. Cold concrete walls and a single bed was my vessel for one of the coldest experiences in my life.

By morning, the snow was everywhere and lay thick in every direction. The entire landscape was transformed, the world muffled beneath a pristine blanket of white. I hesitated. If the storm came back, I could be stuck for a couple days snowed in and the descent could become impassable. But then I remembered, I was in the company of those who call these mountains home. A safety within their knowledge I felt, also, turning back so close to my goal felt near impossible, or deem all this time pointless.

The giver. The sun. Beaming across the sky light a lighthouse of immense scale. It created shadows and silhouettes of unimaginable scale. It had yet to reach the valley in which the day begun so wrapped in every layer, I pressed on. Each footstep sank into the deep snow, the crunch of my boots the only sound in the absolute stillness. I knew people would pass on there decent, but for now, not a soul shared my breath. Comfortable and confident within my own company with the last ascent taking far longer than it should. I could not stop looking at what surrounded me. And the hundreds of pictures taken felt the hours slide by.

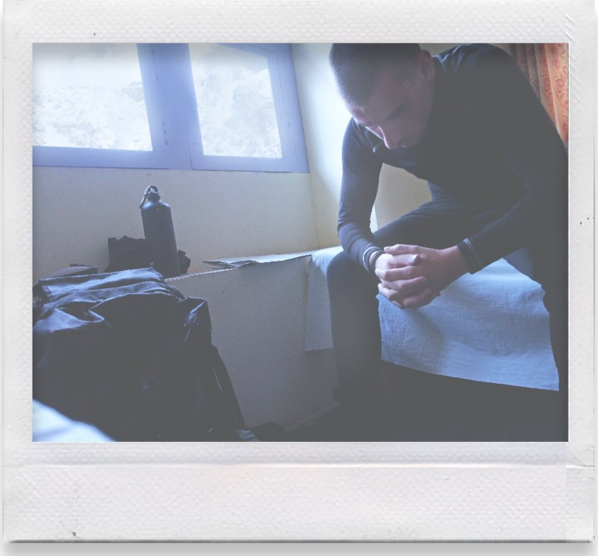
The valley opened up into only three things: Silence, ice and stone.
The massif rose in front of me while light bounced off the snow. Too bright to look at for long.
Long before us, both human and ape, it was here. And long after us, its face un-scarred by our hands, it will remain.
I stood there, wrecked, legs gone, lungs burning... The ever present snickers bar in hand.

The Last Day: Base Camp to the Beginning:

That day, I walked for twelve hours near nonstop, completing the entire descent in a single push. My body moved with an effortless rhythm, my legs steady and strong, my breath controlled. I stopped only when necessary, to stretch, to relieve myself, to eat. I fueled myself with about half a dozen chapati bread and cheese, snickers bars, and as much water as I could manage, about four liters in total. With each step lower in altitude, the oxygen thickened, and so did my energy. The mountain that had drained me on the way up but now seemed to be giving something back, as if in reward.

I discarded layers as the temperature climbed, peeling off the cold-bitten weight of high altitude with every kilometer. Sweat trickled down my back, as the sun warmed my face. The path of stone familiar beneath my feet. Music blasted through my headphones, a steady beat driving me forward.

It was strange, on the ascent, I had felt the full weight of everything, every stone and step a test to commit. But now, on the way down, it felt like I was gliding. Id never felt more capable and Id never been more fit.



At 3800 meters of altitude it started with a dull headache behind the eyes, just like a hangover. I'd shrugged it off as dehydration and the need for more calories. Just keep walking. Drink more water. Eat more chapati bread and cheese.

But by afternoon, nil improvement. My stomach felt twisted into knots. The cold only exacerbating this. I didn't want food.
The thought of more Dal Baht made me nauseous so I forced down a few spoonfuls of ginger soup in the teahouse, then went straight to bed, fully clothed, shivering in my sleeping bag.

That night, it hit properly. Head pounding like I was sprinting, even while lying still. Breathing felt more shallow, like there wasn't enough air in the actual air. My head throbbed with every heartbeat, and I couldn't sleep, I just laid there dizzy, sick, cold and tired. I seriously would have given my pinky finger to be submerged in a hot tub at that moment, as every muscle in my body just would not relax. Not straighten out.

I didn't know if it was serious or just a rough patch, but I knew if I didn't feel better by morning, I'd have to go down. Fast.
"Fuck this shit" I thought.

At one point, I sat up, felt my stomach drop and a sharp pain seemingly moving, shifting until it crept lower and lower into my pubis region. I leapt up, shuffled the 30 odd meters down the open air corridor in my socks to the communal hole in the floor, squatted over the desi style porcelain and expelled an unfathomable amount of mountain cuisine.

Instantly... Every ache in my body and every mental woe was expelled with it. And just like that... I was cured.

Behind every breathtaking view, every snow-capped peak and gut-punch moment of human connection, there's shit. Literal shit. In holes, behind rocks, sometimes not even that. It's as much a part of the journey as the passport you nearly forgot. Strip away the postcards and poetic bullshit, and that's what's left, blisters, awe, and taking a crap at 4,000 meters wondering how the hell you ended up here. And weirdly, you're grateful for all of it.

Kathmandu, NEPAL

Small Heaven Boarding School
Pre-Primary & Primary Department

Travelers shuffle through immigration, clutching crumpled arrival forms of paper and pencil. No e-visa here. Their expressions hovering between exhaustion and anticipation. The line inches forward beneath flickering fluorescent lights. Outside, the chaos is immediate, taxi drivers call out destinations, their voices weaving through the honks of motorbikes and the rumble of overloaded buses. Dust is everywhere. Inescapable.

The capital of Nepal is a compulsory stop for all travelers heading for the Himalayas. The roads twist and coil with an anarchic logic, lined with crumbling buildings that lean into one another, a shudder from the earth threating to bring all of it to dust and rubble. The air carries a strange perfume, incense and exhaust, frying dough and the musk of open gutters. Dogs skulk along the sidewalks, monks in deep maroon robes move with quiet purpose, thought the litter and everywhere, the city parades its noise.

Thamel, the traveler's quarter, is a dense warren of narrow streets where prayer flags tangle above the chaos. Neon signs flicker between power cuts, advertising trekking gear, cheap hostels, and cafés promising a slice of home with plates of spaghetti. The electricity wires overhead resemble a bird's nest spun by a blind man who had lost patience with symmetry. Somewhere in the distance, a temple bell rings, and the city exhales. Kathmandu is both an assault and an embrace, a beautiful, battered transition to something old and spiritual.

Bollywood Nightmare, GOA:

Monsoon season in Goa is like stepping into a wet sock: Damp, suffocating, and slightly regrettable. The streets, usually buzzing with life, were reduced to slick mud-ridden paths littered with fallen palm fronds and the occasional lone sandal, abandoned like a casualty of war. Most businesses were shut tight, save for a few shadowy storefronts with the lights off, as if they, too, had given up. There was one eatery still operating, barely. Inside, a dozen bedraggled travelers sat in silence, all of us guilty of the same mistake: ignoring the fact that it was the rainy season.

Goa, when the sun cooperates, is lush and intoxicating. Jungle vines drape over old Portuguese ruins, palm trees strain under the weight of swollen coconuts, and the air is thick with salt and incense. But it has a dark side. Westerners who come to “find themselves” and, in the process, lose their passports, their sanity, and any semblance of a return home. Some claim enlightenment, others chase an endless high. I was contemplating this while staring at my watery plate of rice and chicken when a British woman in her forties entered, weaving between tables like a politician at a fundraiser. She was rangaling westerners, casting for extras in a Bollywood movie. It paid twenty bucks, but the job mostly involved standing around for twelve hours, sweating in the sun. “Bugger it,” I thought, scribbling down my hotel name and room number for the 5 a.m. minibus pickup. Why not? What else will tommorow bring?

Later that afternoon, I wandered the beach in the spitting rain, a three-kilometer death march to nowhere, purely to burn off the excess energy I had no idea what to do with. The place was eerily deserted, like a tsunami had come through and swept away all the fun, leaving behind only skeletal bamboo shacks and forgotten tarps. The grey clouds and wind forever present. By dusk, as I trudged back toward my hotel, I spotted a group of guys sitting on a cinder block wall, beers in hand, laughing like they had no idea they were marooned in an apocalyptic monsoon wasteland.

“Hey! You stay next door to us!” one shouted, pointing at our single-story hotel, a relic of the 1980s that looked more like a roadside motel where dreams went to die. With absolutely nothing else to do, I accepted my fate: room-temperature Kingfisher beers with the Bangalore boys. Look at me, making friends around the world. I’ve always had a gift for talking to strangers, a skill that has only sharpened with years of travel. In an effort to catch up, I inhaled two beers in ten minutes. The party was officially on. Soon, we had relocated to the motel courtyard. The lads produced whiskey; I produced music. We settled on a ‘Best of Queen’ mix, a universally accepted soundtrack for drunken camaraderie. And I thing I learned: people in India drink their whiskey with water. No ice. No mixer. Just straight-up room-temperature sickly disappointment.

As the night rolled on, we got louder. Someone crooned the chorus to 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' someone else insisted we needed food. I had nothing stashed in my room except a single liter of water. You do not, under any circumstances, drink from the tap in India unless you want a 100% guarantee of the worst 24 hours of your life. The only mini-mart in the area wouldn't open until 10 a.m. My future looked bleak. Desperate, I attempted to liberate a bag of crisps from the glass cabinet at reception, fully intending to pay in the morning. No luck. Then, one of the guys disappeared into his room, where five grown men were crammed into a space with two double beds, and emerged with a foil-wrapped miracle: a mountain of saffron rice.

"Eat, eat, my friend," he said, shoving it into my hands. Didn't have to tell me twice. I shoveled it down, washing mouthfuls with beer, not questioning for a second where it had come from. Big mistake.
Midnight. The party faded, the whiskey dwindled, and I staggered to my room. I layed for a mere 15 minutes before something that felt not quiet right emerged. A deep, dark wrongness. At first, just heat. Sweaty forehead... Then cold shivers...
Then..."FUCK"

I bolted for the toilet. My stomach sharp and clenched, and in one violent heave, a tsunami of acid-drenched, half-digested saffron rice rocketed out of me, graffiti(ing) the bowl. "Ehhhhh fuck." Another upheaval. Chunks of chicken I hadn't even chewed properly. My entire digestive system was turning itself inside out. The heat was worrying, the smell just foul and just as I gasped for air, a new, more insidious threat made itself known. A gurgle. A shift. A pressure drop in my lower intestines. "Ohhh NO."

No time. No options. I spun around and barely managed to get seated before the dam burst. What happened next was less of a bowel movement and more of an exorcism. A lava flow of pure regret, a liquid so corrosive it could have stripped paint. Sweating. Shivering. Empty. I collapsed against the toilet, hollowed out like a man who had just barely survived battle. From the doorway, a stray looking dog stared at me, its head tilted in what I swear was pity. Maybe he'd seen this before. This pattern continued for a fear enducing 2 hours. All the while sipping on my 1 litre of water to make it last.

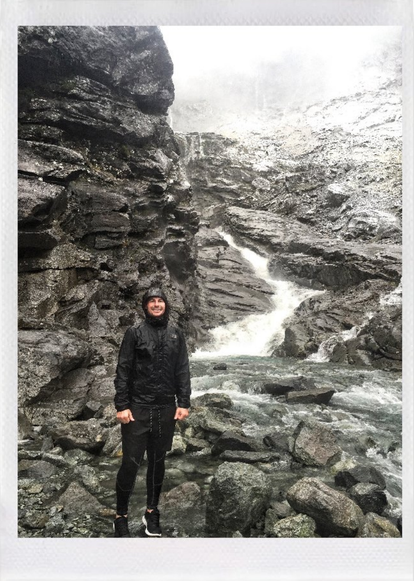
Then, a knock. No, a pounding. "WHAT THE FUCK," I thought, my soul barely clinging to my body. It was the British woman. The 5 a.m. Bollywood pick-up. I had completely forgotten. She had tracked me down at my hotel, determined to haul me to this gig.
I crawled to the door and cracked it open an inch. All I managed was: "NOPE. CAN'T. NOT HAPPENING. I'M SSSSIIIIICCCCCKKKK."
I shut the door before she raged or could argue. I collapsed onto the bed, and prayed to whatever gods of Bollywood were listening that I'd wake up feeling like a human again. *Spoiler: I did not. For around 6 days...*

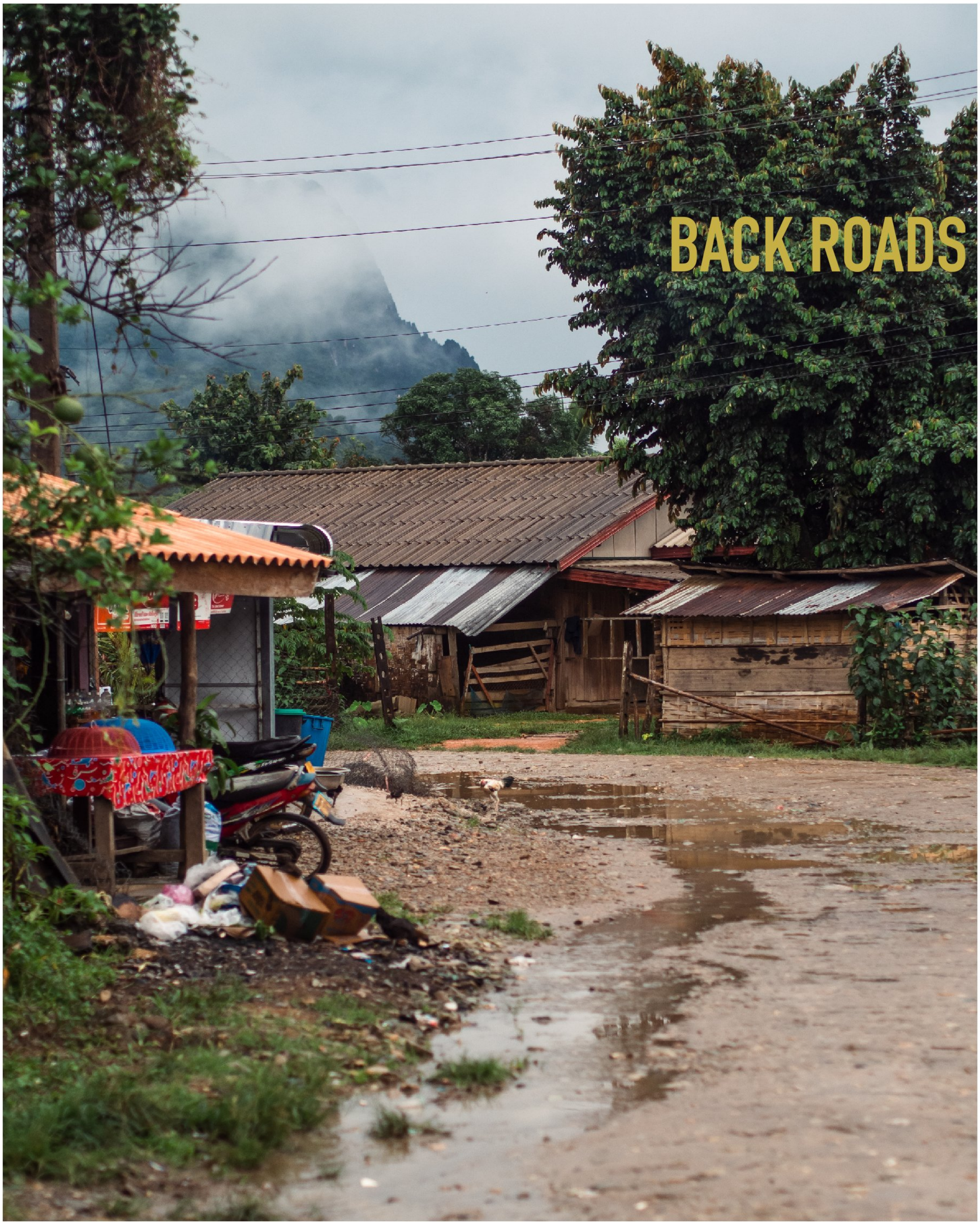
Mt Cook /Aoraki - SOUTHERN ALPS:

Not a city, not even a town, but a village. Home to only 250 full-time residents. You can't buy land here. Development is banned. They got it right early, stopping the spread of over-development before over-tourism could smear its unsightly shit across the face of this paradise. This isn't Queenstown. It doesn't want to be. No pubs pretending to be dive bars. No $18 cocktails called "Southern Alps Sunrise." Just a one-road-in, one-road-out setup with a few lodges, a DOC office, and a small cafe that shuts by 4 p.m. It's not one of those places that tries to impress international money. That's half the charm. The other half is everything else. Outside, Aoraki stands like a jawbone cracked out of the earth, white capped and hulking, cloud streaming off it like cigarette smoke. You see the mountains up close, you kind of feel it. It's everywhere. An unspoilt and untouched land. You especially feel it in the arctic wind thats flows off its sides.

I locked my mountain bike at the car park and walked a few steps before the views really hit me, with proper awe, the kind that burns into the back of your eyelids to be reviewed for years when in dreams. Most people come here just for the Hooker Valley Track. Three swing bridges and a boardwalk to a glacial lake. Easy, photogenic, tourist-friendly. But stick around and the place starts to pull your head into the sky. Peaks on peaks. Endless. A terrain that doesn't flatter you, but dwarfs you. I passed a couple taking selfies every twenty steps, shouting "yaaasssas!" at the mountain like it wanted there approval. Fair enough. Its beauty does that to people. That night I stayed at the YHA. Basic room, creaky bunk, kitchen full of dehydrated noodles and blokes in smelly socks. The stars came out like someone unzipped the sky. No light pollution. No sound. Just you and the great dark. I sat outside with a beer and toast with marmite, not trying to be a loner or anything, its just that nature is sometimes your best company. That's the point of a place like this. It doesn't need your reflection. It just asks you to shut up and be present. And thank Christ someone had the sense to protect it. You can't buy a slice of Aoraki. You can't airbnb it, subdivide it, or build a spa retreat "with panoramic views." No one's handing out leaflets for canyon swings or helicopter tours with EDM soundtracks. The village exists by natures rules. Not the other way around.

The next day I hiked up to Ball Hut overlooking the Tasman Glacier. A scramble and climb over stone where glaciers once carved. Wind in the face. Steps, as usual, like punishment. But when you get there: Wind in the ears, snow on the back, and views that make you feel stupid for ever thinking the digital realm meant anything. Nothing filtered. Just rock, ice, and sky. And a hut, with a view. Your breath smoking in the wind. That's all. And it's everything. Its what is real. It's simply about being hit by what's outside. A beautiful, raw and untamed place that exists beyond the reach of our sculpting hands. Tangible, breathable and hardened.





BACK ROADS OF LAOS

PHONSAVAN:

I left Phonsavan before the weather had decided what it was doing. Sun preferably, rain potentially. The town was still half asleep, and so was I. The night prior I'd rented a scooter that looked like it'd been slid along alot of tarmac, but the guy swore it was a good one "no worries, no worries." He handed me the keys and a black helmet with a tweety bird sticker on the back, and off I went, with a map torn from my Lonely Planet folded in my pocket, as no sim card here, and not much of an idea what lay ahead except the vague promise of dust, mud, isolation and something interesting to experience.

Heading East, the pavement began to dismantle. The road started smooth enough but soon cracked into patches and dust. Towns grew smaller, the concrete gave way to dirt, and soon there were no towns at all. Just clusters of wooden homes, some on stilts, the occasional hand-painted shop sign nailed to a tree, and children who paused their games only long enough to wave, stare or give you the middle finger in playful cheek.

Somewhere around the 30km mark, the world turned quiet. No engine noise, no yelling, no dogs barking. Just the hum of the wind though my helmet, the high whine of my scooter's chain, and when stopped, the distant chirp of birds I'd never be able to name. The land out here is damp yet cracked, hills stitched together by crooked trees. Bomb craters from another country's war still pockmark the ground, thousands of them, some swallowed by grass, some yawning open, collecting rain. Life continues around them, without ceremony. The villages here stay tucked into hillsides, half-hidden behind dust and memory, reminders of how quietly people endure, and how much we take for granted.

I stopped often. Sometimes because the road demanded it, potholes like rivers, a fallen tree, a detour through what was essentially someone's backyard, and sometimes just because I wondered about the point of it all. But mostly y the view. By the silence. By the absurd luck of being born into a life that lets me witness this, this slow, rugged, unpolished world that most people will only ever see on Youtube and badly edited public broadcast documentaries.

These places make you realize just how far removed we are from what's essential. Out here, everything is essential. Every chicken. Every plank of wood. Every drop of fuel. Every child's coloring pencils. No one's wasting time, or pretending to be more important than they are. No one is wearing "busy" like a badge of honor.

I passed villages where the men carved furniture by hand under the shade of woven palm roofs. Women sat on rocks stripping bamboo, weaving baskets like it was the most natural thing in the world. Children rode rusted bicycles that had been patched and welded so many times they barely resembled bicycles anymore, but they still moved forward. So did I.

Coming through one of the valleys, the rain began to settle in. That thick, sticky kind of tropical wet that doesn't leave a dry inch. My shirt clung to me, and the scooter's engine started to protest at every rev and turn. The road here had become gravel and sharp stone. Each kilometer was a muddy handshake with uncertainty. I'd pass the occasional pick-up truck loaded with timber or water containers, each one slowing just enough for the driver to give a nod or a knowing smirk at the silly traveler, spinning his tires in an attempt to not get bogged.

Then came the snap. A sound too crisp, too final. The engine whirred. The wheels spun uselessly. I coasted to a halt just outside a village barely visible on a map. Maybe 100 people lived here, if that. A cluster of homes buried in the foliage, chickens roaming freely under the floors, laundry lines strung from tree to tree like makeshift borders.

I got off the bike, stared at the broken chain, and muttered a big FUCK YOU to my failed machine. Maybe it was the rider I should've been cursing. That's when I heard it: the unmistakable sound of sandals flip flopping against dirt. A man approached, maybe mid-20s, maybe older, it's hard to tell in places like this where the sun writes your age onto your skin. He didn't say a word at first. Just crouched beside the scooter and looked at the damage. I shrugged. He laughed. Confidently, as if to say "trust me" "this is nothing".

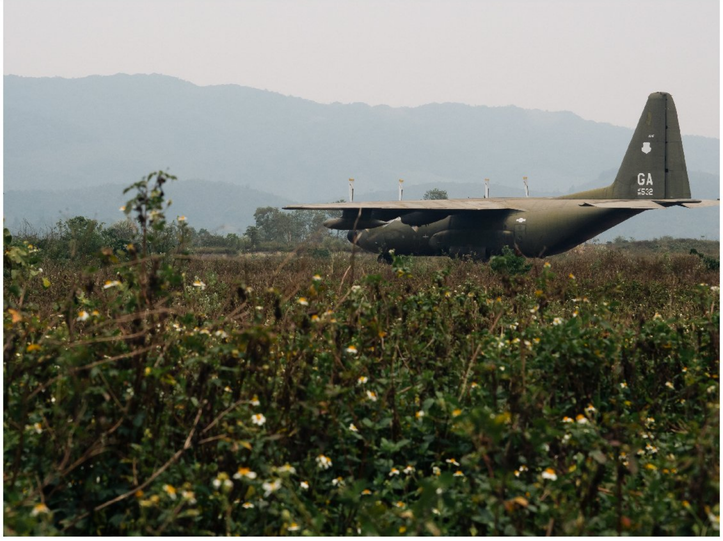
He gestured for me to follow him. I pushed the bike along as we turned into the tiny village. Out the front of his house, he had a small workbench covered in bits of metal, some spanners & tools, and an old 44 gallon drum. He pointed to a bench under a tree and gestured me to sit.

What followed was maybe 40 minutes of watching this man, in the almost dark at this point of the day, who, I full of shame, cant remember his name, piece my chain back together like it was a puzzle he'd solved a thousand times. Occasionally, a kid or two would run over to watch, then dart off again. A woman came out from inside the house and handed me a small cup of tea, grined, and vanished before I could even say thank you. When the chain was fixed, the man stood up, wiped his hands on a rag, and gave the bike a pat, like a horse ready to ride again. I reached for some currency out of respect for his time. He held up a hand. Shook his head. Laughed again.

I tried again anyway. He took a single bill, not even what the repair was worth, but enough for him to accept my gratitude without offence. I shook his hand firmly, with respect, as his was much more useful than mine. I rode out of that village with the sun gone and the air beginning to cool. The engine hummed its apology for the earlier betrayal. As I turned the next bend, I looked back just in time to see the glow of a fire flicker through the trees. A communal fire pit or just to cook dinner, who knows, the village had begun its evening as I looked forward to mine.

That night, I found a homestay with a single bed, no WiFi, and a window that looked out over the black silhouette of the limestone hills. I lay in bed, the hum of insects rising like a choir, and thought about how absurdly lucky I am.

To have been born into a life where the hardest decision I face is where to go next. To move through the world with curiosity instead of necessity. To be met with kindness in a place where I arrived with nothing to offer but some broken language and a broken bike chain. That's when travel does its job, not in the ticking of bucket lists or social media clout, but in the quiet exchanges, in the middle of nowhere, with people who owe you nothing, but in a moment of need, give everything.

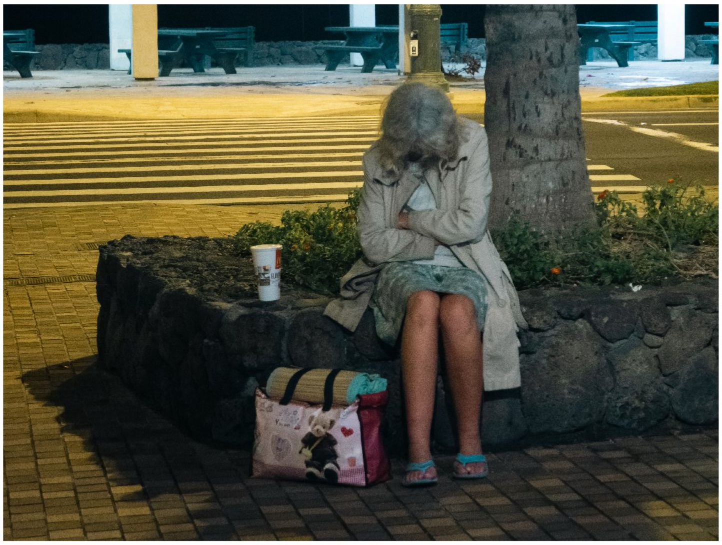


Khe Sanh, VIETNAM *"Nothing Grows Straight"*

The airstrip's still there, cracked and half-eaten by jungle, like the land's trying to heal a scar. But the metal beast still sits, a rotting carcass of American ambition. No tourists when you came in, too hot. even the camera lens was fogged over. Just soft wind through grass and the faint metallic stink of oxidising history. You stood where boys once died for slogans their fathers stitched into flags. Forgotten ghost humming beneath the weeds.

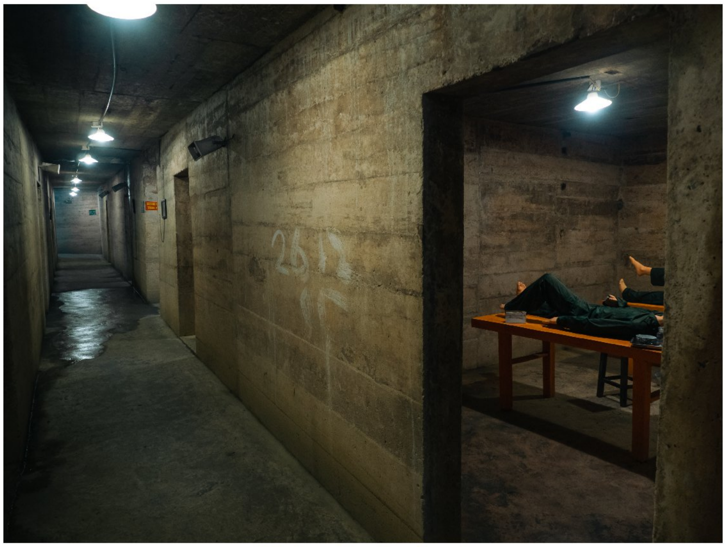
Honolulu, HAWAII *"The Global Icebreaker"*

They raised their bottles like weapons, laughing through Budweiser foam, bad playlists and Americana decals. No one mentioned the guy outside trying to find some cocaine. No one noticed the girl in the corner with her phone light on, crying because of her boyfriend troubles. The party wasn't wild or evil. It's just no one carred. Several countries made up the conversations as barriers melted with the swigging of beers.



Honolulu, HAWAII *"Intermission"*

She wasn't asking for help. She just sat there with eyes lost somewhere between the pavement cracks and a world that may have forgotten her name. Her bag with a teddy bear printed on it, a sign that were all still children on the inside, stuck in adult bodies. Yearning for a warmth once felt, in her own bed, safe, loved. But not here. Not at 2AM under flickering streetlights within the indifference of a world that has stopped caring.
To what others call paradise, Here I felt empty.



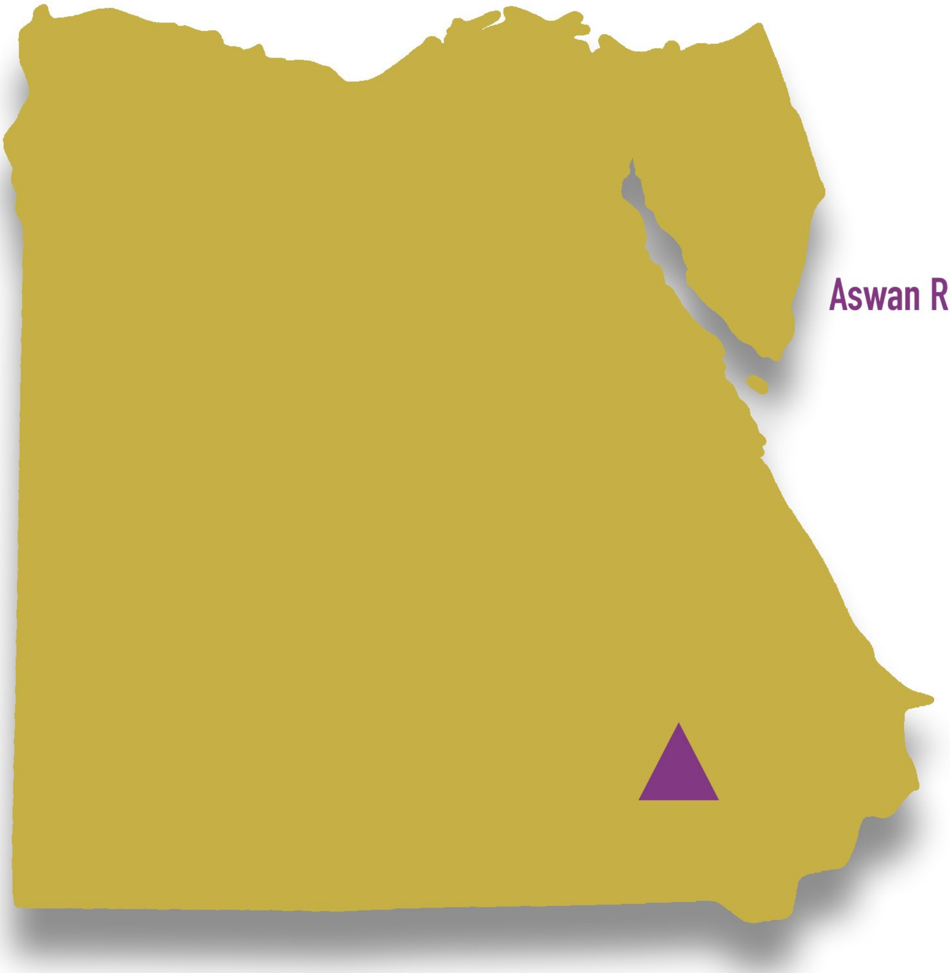
DMZ Region, VIETNAM *"Below the Surface"*

The bunker breathes cold through your teeth. Concrete and mildew, rusted hinges and shadows that creep you. This was a nerve centre once, now just a damp scar beneath the skin of the earth. People planned death here. Precision murder scribbled in notebooks. You stood where maps ruled and people bled. And somewhere deeper, in a room with no light, something still lingers. Haunted. Unfinished.

“Maybe some of us are just built for leaving,
for loving the world from the edges”

New Delhi, INDIA – 2013

Jazīrat Al Malik



Aswan Region / Egypt;

Jazirat al-Malik (Egypt)

15.5000° N - 32.5000° E

"الصبر مفتاح الفرج"

"Al-sabr miftah al-faraj"
"Patience is the key to relief"
An Arabic proverb emphasizing the virtue of patience leading to eventual ease.

ExPERIENCES within a MOdErn Egypt:

The cheapest (one) way to Egypt:
Port Macquarie to Sydney: Overnight at Sydney.
Sydney to Singapore: Overnight at Singapore.
Singapore to Oman: Overnight at Oman.
Oman to Cairo: Overnight at Cairo.

All different airlines, all individually booked, all carry-on.
No leaving the airports, up to 12-hours per stopover:
About 82 Hours in TRANSIT:

In Cairo, it began with a 5-hour delay on the tarmac from a massive sandstorm that blanketed the city. It was definitely a different culture here, as passengers (both male and female) were standing up and yelling at flight attendants (both male and female), shaking their hands in anger and dealing out some verbal abuse while the attendants just stood there. Like it was standard procedure. No panic, no escalation, just a weird, static tension. Like uneasy theatre.

As the sun was setting I could just see the tarmac changing from black tar to orange sand, seemingly narrowing, the wind still rocking the plane as we sat disconnected from the terminal. It felt like we were floating in a sea of rust. A glow that belongs more to Mars than Earth. A surreal first impression.

Cairo to Aswan:

We were the last flight to arrive at Aswan Airport at around 11:30pm. No shops or taxis waiting, just that grim vibe of a closed shopping center or airport for the departing 40 or so passengers. Most were Egyptians with family picking them up and rides organized. I assumed it would be as simple as jumping in a taxi, but I quickly realized, as other passengers were whisked away, that this might be an issue. Getting to where I was meant to be sleeping that night became the final task, as Aswan itself was around 30km away.

I shared a taxi with a strange yet friendly Canadian who spoke like he'd hit some helium and was still floating a few feet above the rest of us. Nice guy, and he was keen to hang the following day, but some days are just better spent on your own terms. We rode to the ferry, then shared a taxi boat across to Elephantine Island. I paid double what the journey should've been because he'd prearranged it all with his homestay, and I, well, I was just taking each challenge as it came. But at this point of the evening, I'll take the hit. All is sweet. After 5 days of planes, shuttles, buses, taxis and a single boat, I had arrived at Elephantine Island in the far south of Egypt, floating on The River Nile at midnight: but to the following:

ROSE GUEST HOUSE.
HAMO HOUSE

There are no roads, cars, proper footpaths or streetlights on the island that measures roughly 1000 meters long and 500 meters wide. My phone was out of battery so no map for reference, only a mental image of where I'd booked the homestay. No locals walking around as there are no restaurants or bars, just a cinder block general store with the usual sacks of rice and timber shelves lined with a few dozen random items. Closed at this late hour. The dark dirt paths wove like a spider's web through two-storey concrete, rubble and clay homes, lined with rubbish, abandoned wooden carts, and attempted veggie patches gasping in the heat. The occasional goat, rummaging though rubbish, stepping on discarded plastic bottles in the dark making me shit myself and leap out of my skin.

I've always prided myself in generally knowing which direction I'm facing - North & South East & West - but after a few half bends and some reluctant backtracking, I lost my sense of confidence that I was marching the right way.

Even if momentarily, its pretty hard to be physically lost in this world, but if your still using an iPhone 6 as I with a battery that taps out after 4 hours (listening to music on the tarmac) you still just might. Excitement dwindled and annoyance began to brew as I had the expectation that I would be sitting with home brew coffee in hand and feet dangling in the waters of The Nile by sunset, as opposed to sitting in a giant metal cylinder among aircon, fluorescent lighting and farts.

At this point, I must mention that in order to make this trip even more affordable, outside of the time torture I already passed in order to get here, I came in the middle of summer. Most international travelers and tours try to avoid this time of year, as the temperature is unlike any I'd experienced before. Hot, yes. But dry heat. Not a lick of moisture in the atmosphere. You could feel your skin sizzle if you stood in it for more than a minute, with never a cloud or rain to relieve all from this furnace.

I was dripping wet with sweat, and although it was dark, it was still around 30 degrees and not even a queef of wind was blowing through these narrow alleys. I was boiling, sweaty, and most of all, I was thirsty. Dreaming of a 1.5L bottle of room temp water potentially waiting on my bedside table at the homestay became the only fantasy I could latch onto. I knew it wasn't going to be fancy, and I couldn't just dog it and drink from the communal bathroom faucet. I didn't want to come all this way just to hang out on a toilet. But surely, surely, there was something I could scrounge around to drink...

I continued my sweaty wanderings, often pausing momentarily to see if I could hear the river, as my accommodation sat on it. And sure enough, once I found the water, I momentarily found the homestay.

A Nubian family-run place, their home next door, this one left to the temporary occupants. A small open-air courtyard, enough for a kitchen nook with an old fridge and a sink next to the doors of three rooms. I immediately opened the fridge, assuming there might be a bottle or two of sealed water... but no. Just dirty shelfs with the smell of mould and a furnace more than a fridge in terms of internal temperature. We all know that smell. . .

Such a simple commodity that we take for granted had become all I cared about as I know when I get dehydrated, the old joints start to do it a bit rough, and I was only at the start of the 4 weeks I was to spend in Egypt. Too soon for a rest and re-coop day.

There was no one around. Not a soul at this hour. Just the quiet lapping of the river that met the outside wall of the house. But there was a shower. An open wet room with a shower head above the toilet, as common in many places of challenged finance. So, at 12:20am, I sat on the cool porcelain and let the water rid me of the dust and grime accumulated over the last 50 hours. It felt like I'd left behind a physical weight once out: Instant relief.

Only to be shortly outdone.

When I turned the corner to go back to my tiny room, two LARGE bottles of water had appeared on the colourful Rasta-pattern WELCOME mat at my door. An aquatic guardian had gifted me cwench. A miracle of the modest kind. THANK FUCK!!!
There was an old white plastic kettle in the courtyard kitchen and a few instant coffee sachets on the bench. So rather than crash out, as that's all my body and mind desired, I made that drink and sat with my feet in The Nile. Not over sunset, but moonlight. At about 1AM.

The stars weren't many, the sky still dusty from the sandstorm that blanketed the entire country, but the moon laid a pale ribbon of silver across the river's surface. I sat there for a while. *Everything in its right place.*

An Attempted (Micro) Adventure in the Sahara:

Elephantine Island: A quiet sliver of green and dust moored in the middle of the Nile, shaded by palms and heavy with the low, slow rhythm of Nubian life. The guesthouse had faded rugs and carved wooden shutters that sung with the wind. You could arrange a dozen kinds of neat excursions from there, sunset felucca rides, camel treks, temple tours with a soft-spoken guide pointing out the worn hieroglyphs. But I wasn't after something polished. I didn't want to be shown anything just yet. I just wanted to step into the Sahara and see how the real adventures of old times might have felt all those years ago in the golden age of exploration.

Across the river from Aswan, a thin line of brick homes clung to the edge of the bank, trying not to slide into the Nile's current. Behind them rose the first real dunes, massive, honey-gold, and perfectly smooth. They looked like a wall to something else. And beyond them, the desert began in earnest, with no shade, no trail, no narrative.

I hired a boatman and haggled for the price of a drop-off and a vague promise of pick-up the next day, but there was some miscommunication. "You sleep there?" he asked, squinting like I was proposing something weird. When I showed him my five-liter water bottle and a blanket crammed into my pack, he made a face of comic concern, then nodded: "Ahhh. Yes. Yes. Sleep. Okay."

The hike began with the trail leading toward the Monastery of St. Simeon, a crumbling fortress of stone and silence about an hours walk inland. Built in the 7th century, then expanded two centuries later, it once housed monks so determined in their asceticism they'd walled themselves in. The place is mostly ruin now, palm-sized bricks half reclaimed by sand, wind-scrubbed archways, a roofless church. When I arrived, the only other soul was a plain-clothed security guard, a man with a 9mm on his hip and nothing much to guard except time itself. He showed me his gun with a boyish grin, like a magician revealing a trick. I smiled and nodded, pretending I understood why we were both here. *And then I turned away from the path, toward nothing.*

I picked a direction and walked, following the curve of the dunes like they might lead me to a story. They didn't. For three hours I trudged over massive, shifting sand hills, each crest revealing only another hollow and another climb. My legs burned. My shoes filled with sand, emptied, then filled again. Eventually, even the idea of the Nile fell away. No footprints, no wires, no goat trails. Just the Sahara: a kingdom of light and heat and no concern for my presence.

At some point, a lone structure appeared in the distance. It looked like a house, or what was left of one, four walls, sun-bleached bricks, roof long gone. I stepped inside, careless. That's when the shit got scared out of me: We both jumped, startled. He'd been napping in a sunbeam cutting through the doorway. A stray, thin but not skeletal. I backed out immediately, rabies still has teeth in Egypt, but the dog followed slowly, curious. I cut a plastic bottle in half, filled it with water, and left some broken naan beside it. He licked once, then watched me with a solemn, unblinking stare. I left him to his kingdom.

By four in the afternoon, I found what passed for camp, an old stone wall, maybe four feet high, stretching a dozen paces long.

Nothing around it. It could've been a livestock pen, or a windbreak, or some lost boundary line from when people once thought they could live out here.

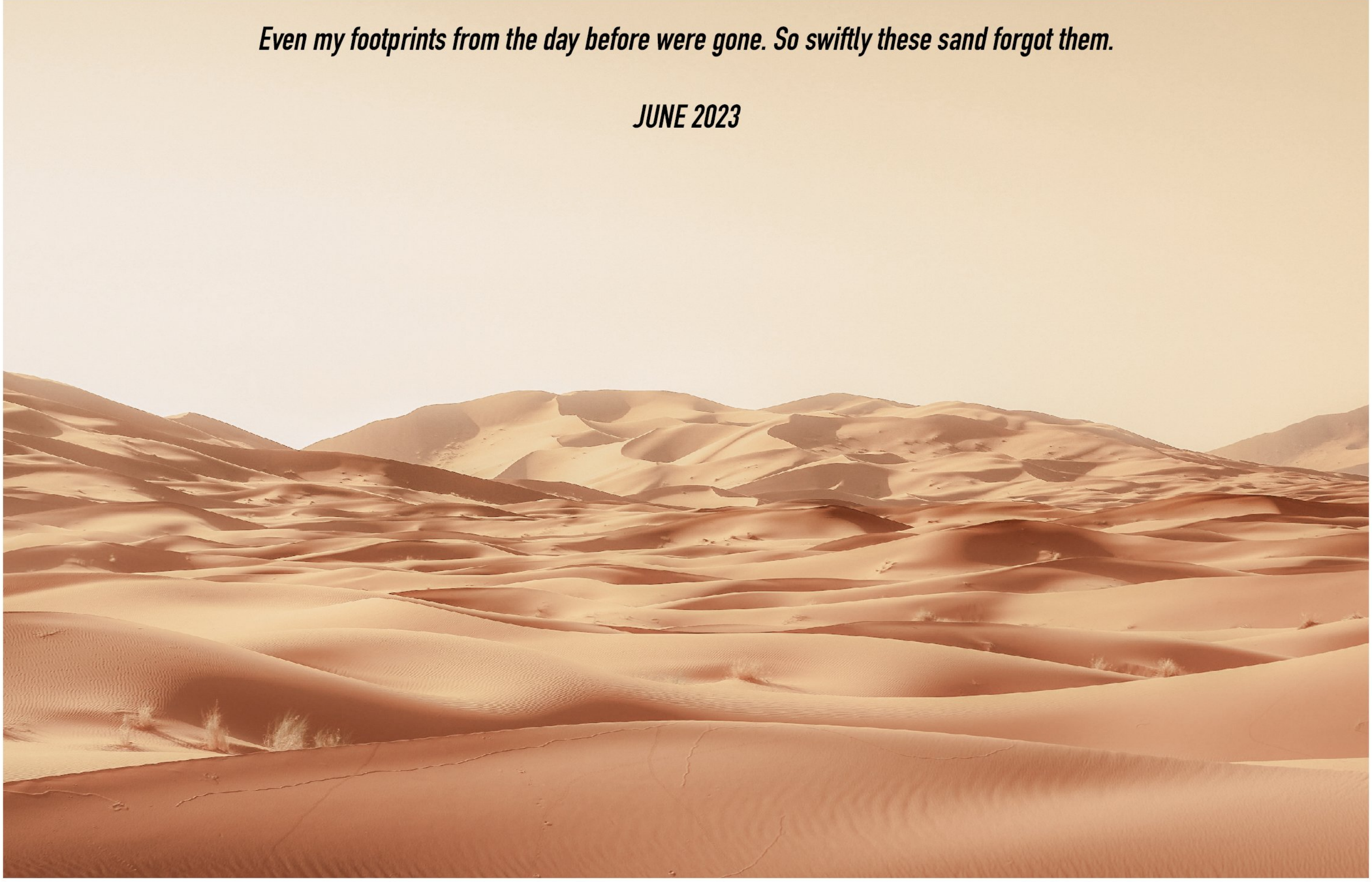
I’d bought a bundle of sticks from a dead tree when I got off the boat, planning to reheat my garlic and butter naan or boil some water for a gritty cup of instant coffee in the morning. But that was just theory. Dinner was dry nann, warm water, and the slow settling realization that no one knew where I was, not really. My bed was the sand, my blanket was a woven thing with the insulating power of toilet paper, and my pillow was my half empty water bottle wrapped in a jacket.

Why? Why go through the wrangling of logistics, the sweat, the blisters, the solitude, just to sleep alone in the dust at the edge of a vast nothing? I had no clean answer. Maybe it's a refusal to let go of a version of myself that used to chase these kinds of misadventures with a hunger. Maybe it's something deeper, a resistance to comfort, to the easy path, to the soft extinction that happens when one stops trying altogether. Maybe I thought something would happen. A revelation. A fox crossing the dunes. A spirit. Something. But nothing came. Just the wind. And then the stillness.

I lay there watching the orange glow of Aswan on the horizon to the east, a reminder of electric life, Coca Cola and mattresses. To the west, stars. So many stars. More stars than dreams. I turned from side to side, over and over, trying to find a pocket of warmth or meaning. Neither arrived. And still, the sky changed. Just before dawn, the desert turned cobalt blue. That kind of blue that only exists in liminal moments, between night and day. The world held its breath. No birds, no rustle, no pulse. Just a silence. I sat up, legs stiff and back sore, and watched as the sun teased the dunes awake.

I thought of the ancient ones. Not the pharaohs in their golden tombs, but the workers. The ones who shaped bricks in this same sand, who hauled water in goatskins, who prayed to the sun because it was the only god that made itself known every day without fail. I thought of their fatigue, their wonder, their need for rest. Were they, too, confused by their own desires? Did they chase stillness in the hope that it might answer something?

With lighter I sparked newspaper and twigs into a tiny fire and warmed some water. Just enough to dissolve the instant coffee into something drinkable. I drank it not because it tasted good, but because it awoke me. The dog had long disappeared. So had the shape of the house. Everything had been erased again in the light of the new day.



Even my footprints from the day before were gone. So swiftly these sand forgot them.

JUNE 2023

Dahab, The Red Sea:

Days could have passed here. Months, even. I would've been happy to let them.
There was something magical about the water off Dahab's southern edge, something electric. I'd dive in, and it was like plugging into another world entirely. Not just the immaculate coral reefs or the way the fish moved like wind over sand, it was the silence: Full of life you couldn't touch, only drift beside.

Hours would pass breathing through a snorkel while your back slowly burned, the sun unrelenting above and the world below utterly indifferent. It had a different feel to the other diving meccas I'd been to, less polished, less showy. No boats hauling in gear by the ton, no pretense. Just shoreline, fins, and the sea opening up. But as soon as I stepped out, it was gone. I'd sit barefoot on the rocks, sun-stung and dazed, and feel like something had been lifted from me. Whatever energy existed below the surface didn't follow you up. It stayed down there, where the colors were sharper and time didn't matter.

Mornings were simple, a coffee and a croissant at some sleepy café with plastic chairs and a sand on the floor. The days stretched out, soft and weightless. Submerged, until they folded into dusk. And then dinner: a plate of shawarma or lamb from a stall near the water, eaten slowly as the sun sank and the mecca of Saudi Arabia loomed in the distance across the narrow sea.

I hadn't expected to find such a place in Egypt. I knew it was a diving location but not to this perfection. Dahab had slipped past my defenses like a high tide at night and I hadn't planned to fall for it, but I did.

Surface Tension in THAILAND:

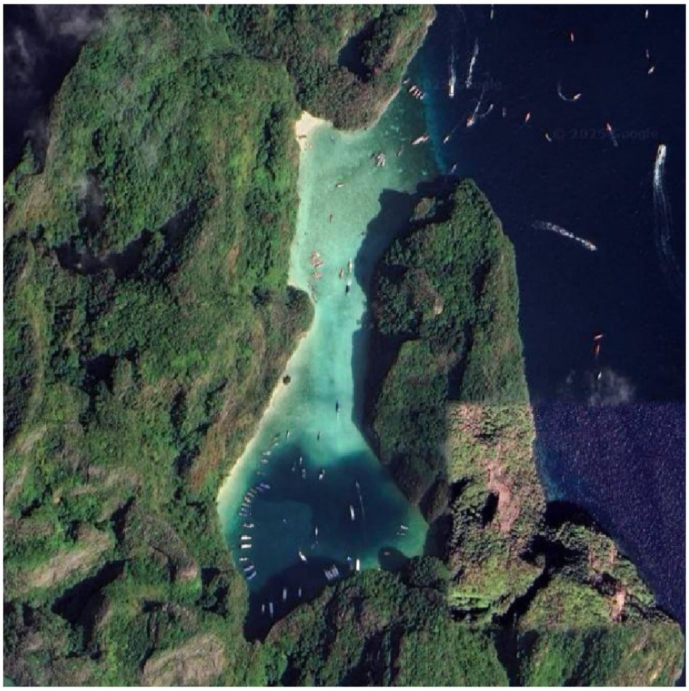
It was just the two of us, my brother and I, on a long-tail boat, the engine coughing its way across the turquoise waters off Ko Phi Phi. We were on a day trip to island hop and snorkel, just chasing that southern Thai magic. We were on the opposite side of the island from the famous Maya Bay, in Phi Lay Bay, and it wasn't quiet at all. Busy with boats and echoing engine noise, our captain cut the motor in the chaos. The water was clear, the cliffs steep, and the sun violent overhead. There were hundreds of people in the bay swimming and snorkeling. That's why people came here.

We slapped on our masks and jumped into the sea. Twelve feet down, gliding along the sandy bottom, we drifted through some of the clearest water in the world. I followed behind him, lungs full, ears ringing with the muffled hum of a hundred distant engines. When I started to rise, I looked up, double-checked, nothing above me. No boats. No rock. The surface shimmered empty.

Three seconds later, my head broke through and something massive hit me. Not directly. But fast. A fucking speedboat.

It rolled across my lower back and ass like a wave made of fiberglass, close enough to lift me with its force. I spun with it instinctively. It missed me by maybe two or three inches. By the time I got my bearings, the boat was already ten meters ahead, the driver's mouth hanging open. A Thai teenager, maybe seventeen, showing off for a boatload of sunburnt tourists who now looked like they'd witnessed a live decapitation. I couldn't believe it, even the back of my heels didn't catch the propeller. I was completely unscathed. I gave a double thumbs-up to to the boat, just to say I was all fine.

And I *was* fine. So I let it go. I didn't think too hard about it. I don't revisit it too often. I just moved on. Because if I had surfaced just a second or two earlier, maybe less, this book would've been filled with a very different story.



The Cheapest Room in Berastagi, SUMATRA:

The bus lurched to a stop in the centre of Berastagi, a highland town tucked between volcanoes in Sumatra's cool interior. The doors wheezed open, and I stepped off. I was the only foreigner on the bus, a sign to find places unspoilt. The town was a refreshing contrast to the places I had passed through before, clean streets, fresh mountain air, and a sense of unhurried calm. It was a welcome sight, especially as I was barely four weeks into what would become a nine-month journey across Asia, a trip still unfolding with my path not confirmed.

Backpack on, a Thank You to the driver and started I walking, scanning the few streets that made up the town centre for a cheap place to stay. Money had to stretch, and in places like this, the cheapest options are often hid in plain sight. After a few blocks, I spotted a small shop with a sign that read "Rooms Available." Inside, a middle-aged woman sat behind a counter stacked with biscuits, sachets of instant noodles, and neatly arranged plastic bottles of water. When I asked about a room, she nodded and led me through a narrow alley behind the shop.

From the outside, a flimsy plywood door with a gutter trickling the recent rain. From the inside, a basic room costing just $3 AUD per night upon conversion, an absolute bargain. A mattress stretched across a wooden frame, covered in fresh, clean sheets that smelled of floral detergent. A single power point sat near the floor, and a ceiling fan spun lazily above. A single bulb dangled from the ceiling, its faint glow revealing fresh white paint on timber walls and a small window with see through curtains, exotic birds printed on them. The bathroom was a squat toilet and a bucket of cold water, standard for budget stays in this part of the world. Still, it was shelter, and at just a few dollars a night, it fit my needs perfectly.

I had come to Berastagi for the volcano, Gunung Sibayak, an active peak that belched sulfurous gas from its rocky belly. The next morning, I set off early, my legs fresh and my mind keen. The hike was a endless climb, winding through roads into dense jungle and then up exposed slopes that reeked of sulfur. The air thick with the smell of rotten eggs.

The summit felt otherworldly, jagged rocks, plumes of yellow gas hissing from vents in the earth, and a sky stretching endlessly above. It was like stepping into Mordor, a land both beautiful and foreboding. I explored for a while, drinking in the eerie solitude before beginning the long, knee destroying descent back to town.

By the time I returned, my legs were leaden, trembling from ten hours of relentless ascent and descent. I wandered the streets aimlessly, half-exhausted, half-dreaming. That was when two young men, seated at a plastic table outside a food stall, waved me over. “Eat here, my friend,” one of them said, smiling.

I hesitated, but hunger won. I dropped onto a red plastic stool as they dished up a bowl of steaming noodles for me. We talked in broken English and they in Bahasa, the universal language of shared smiles bridging the gaps. When I reached for my money, they shook their heads. “No, no,” one of them insisted. “You are guest.” I protested, but they wouldn’t hear it. Their generosity was effortless.

It’s something I’ve seen time and again on the road, the less people have, the more they want to share. Wealth in material things means little when compared to wealth in kindness. The attitude of many in the quiet corners of Indonesia. As I limped back to my tiny room behind the shop, I felt a fullness that had nothing to do with the noodles.

Berastagi was just a stop on a very long trip, the longest so far in my life, a dot on a map I would eventually leave behind. But some places linger with you long after you’ve moved on. The smell of sulfur on the mountain, the pines in the sparkling rain upon ascent, the quiet cleanliness of the paved streets, the warmth of happy strangers, these are the souvenirs.

GOLD & SILK:

Somewhere beyond Leh, where the roads no longer held tar and the sky turned blue, I found myself among figures. They were not shadows, of course. They were women, timeless, immovable, lit from behind by the high Himalayan sun like stained glass in a chapel, Their cloaks swayed slow, stitched from a memory older than borders, older than politics. A russet of wool, trimmed in sheepskin, edged in thread dyed with mountain roots. One of them lifted her headdress against the light, not as performance, but as invocation. Turquoise beads clattered like rainfall across woven silk.

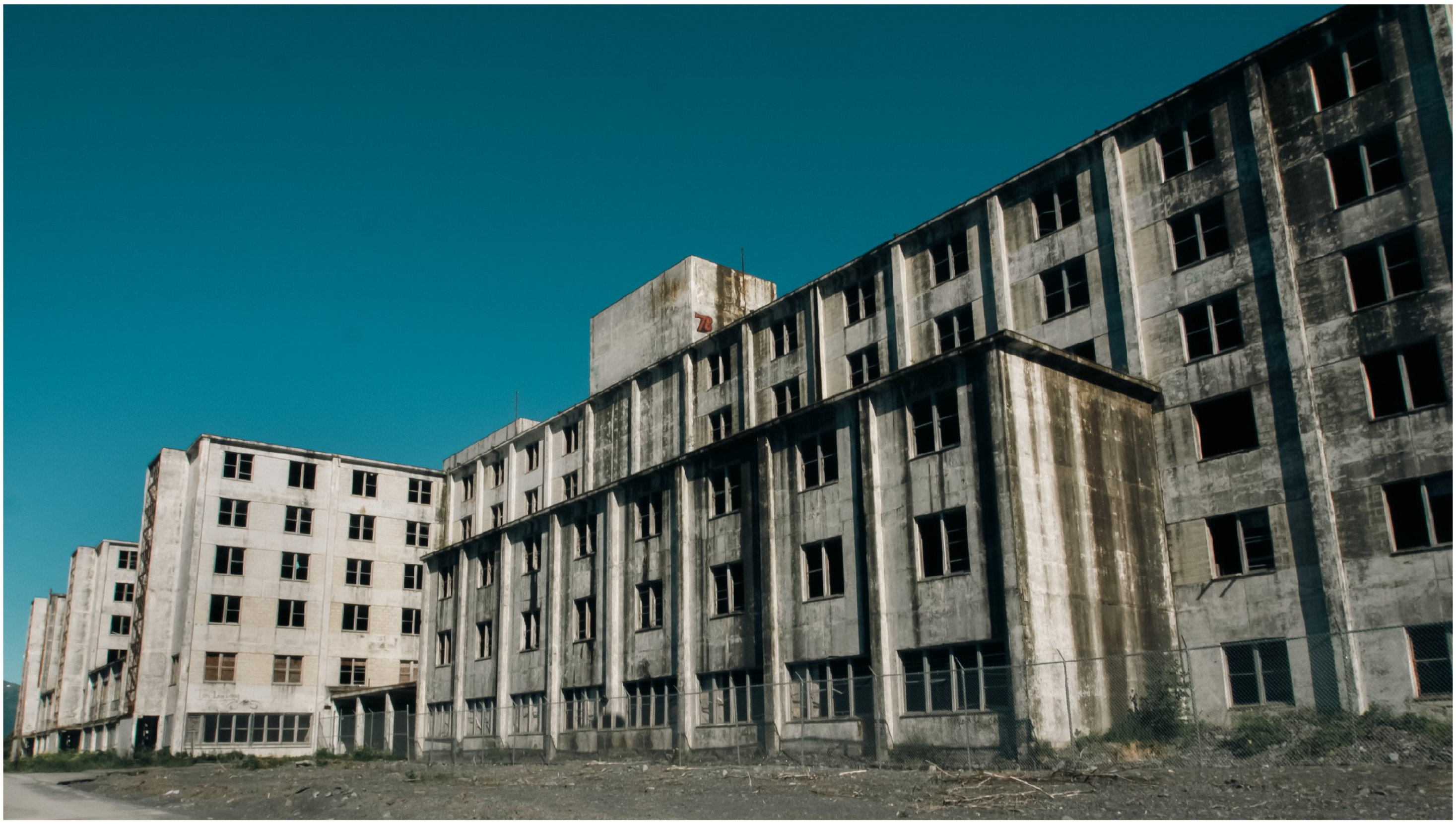
This was not a ceremony for show. There were no signs, no markers, no pamphlets to explain. Just the hush of altitude, the low murmur of wind through prayer flags, and the sense that I had stumbled, quite by accident, into a moment. The day had begun unremarkable, with some lack of motivation and a strangers coughing and spitting waking me throughout the night, I had slept in, which left me hours from the planned route and even further from my intentions. I walked westward across a plain that cracked like old glass beneath my shoes. Nothing but space and yak droppings and the thin hiss of wind. Then, as the path rose again and turned toward a cluster of mud-brick homes pressed into the hills, I heard it. A bell, faint, deliberate.

Then another. I followed it out of curiosity and compulsion to find something worth photographing. You don't question if your invited. You simply follow. What I found was not an event. It was a gathering of women, their backs turned to the world, their movements unhurried. Some bore ceremonial cloaks stitched with spiraling patterns like galaxies. Others wore thick belts of silver and coral, or had turquoise braided into their hair in long, looping rows. There was music, only bells and chants.

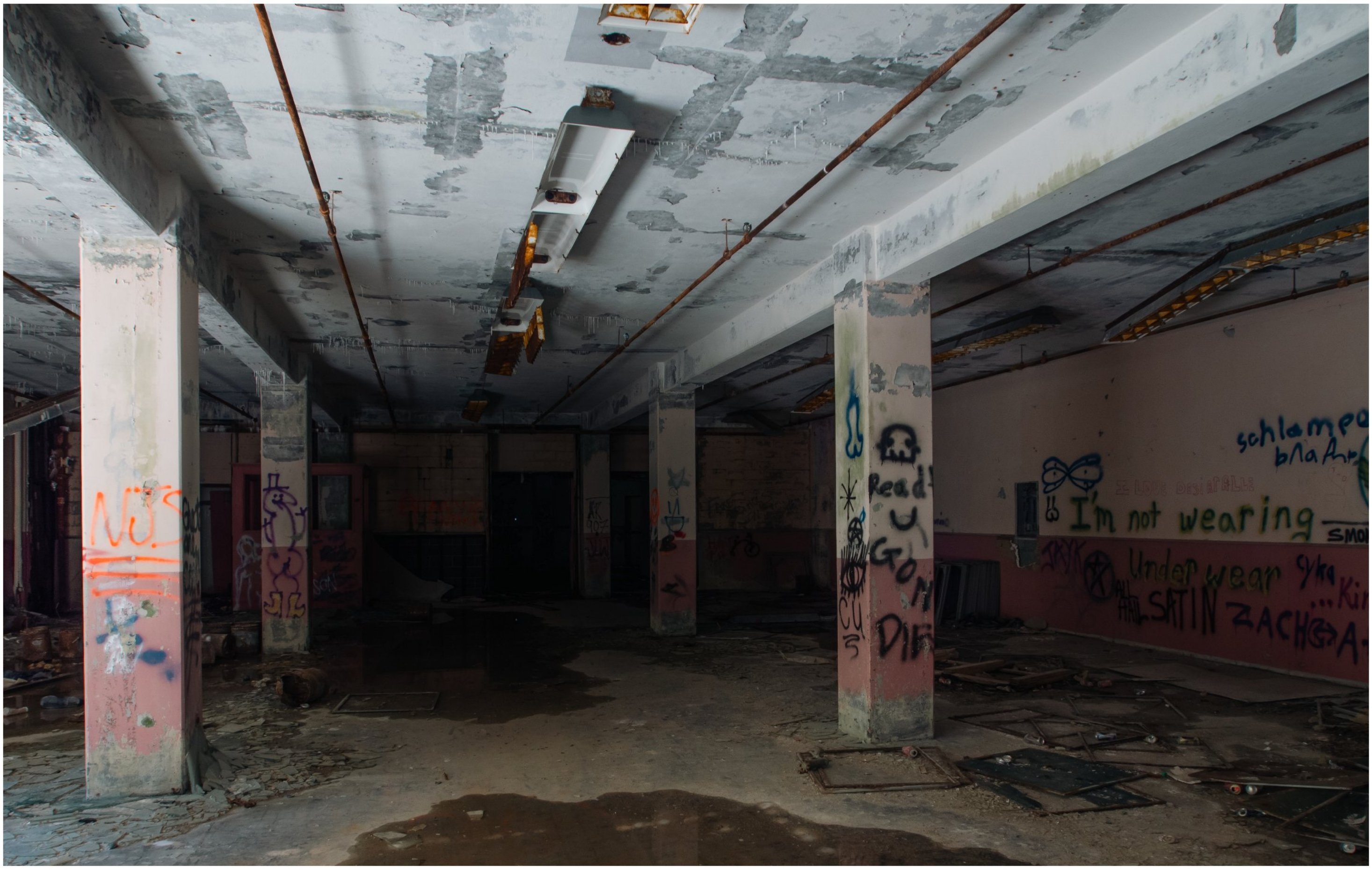
They didn't acknowledge me, and that was their right. I stood on the edge of the path hoping to not intrude. Id hate for them to look at me and think "go away tourist" " but they just grinned and I grinned back. I didn't dare raise my camera. That would have made the moments smaller. And this, whatever it was, deserved to remain vast. There was no spectacle. No curated folk culture. No man with a mic explaining Ladakhi heritage. These women were not preserving tradition, they were living it, sweating under it, breathing through it. The weight of their jewelry alone could have told the history of the Himalayas. Their garments carried more age and stories than my life ever would.

They passed by, hands folded, eyes calm. They looked at me thankfully not with irritation, but with the patience of people who know peace with all things. Even foreigners with dusty shoes and romantic illusions. Still I stood, bareheaded under that mountain sky, unsure if I was witnessing a wedding, a funeral, or the anniversary of something sacred and unnamed. It might've been just a Tuesday. In Ladakh, the spiritual realm, the days don't wear names like ours, they carry seasons.

Slowly, the procession began to move. The bells resumed, gentle, like breathing. I watched until the last red hem disappeared behind the rise of the hill. I never found out what it was. I never asked the locals. I walked back to my bike, my shadow stretched out behind me, long and unsure. The only sound left was the ever constant wind, tapping gently on my shoulder like a memory asking to be remembered.



The Buckner Building, Whittier, ALASKA:


schlampe
I'm not wearing
Underwear
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The Buckner Building loomed against the Alaskan sky, an immense concrete corpse of Cold War paranoia. It sprawled across the landscape, a behemoth of decay and abandonment, its vast, hulking form swallowing the light. Once a self-contained city, it had housed hundreds, now it was little more than a skeletal ruin, its windows dark sockets, its bones creaking with things unseen. I had come to photograph it, to step into its rotting husk and capture its decay, but as I pushed open the rusted door, I felt the air shift, thick, stale, almost aware.

Inside, the scent of mold and urine clung to every surface. Snow melt dripped from broken pipes, and graffiti bled down the walls like warnings left by those who had fled. I moved cautiously through empty corridors, past rooms filled with shattered furniture and the remnants of lives lived in secrecy, mattresses rotting on floors, burnt spoons glinting in my flashlight beam. The place so massive I knew I wasn't alone. Junkies came here, people who wanted to disappear. And so did bears.

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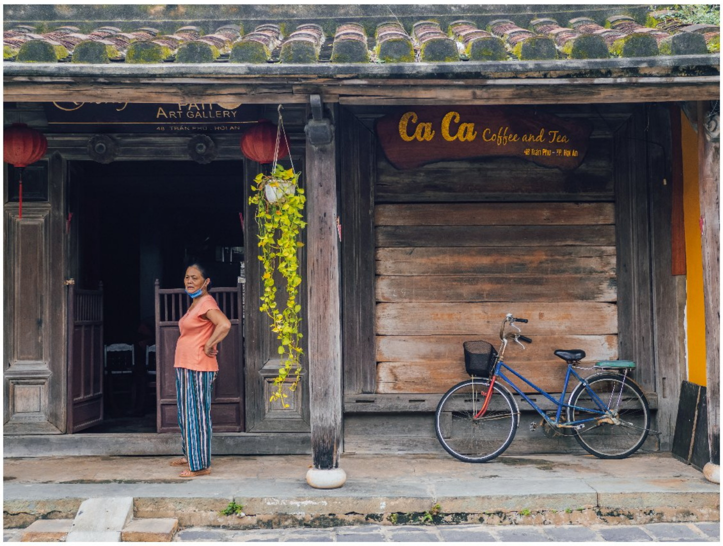
The deeper I went, the worse it became. The air thickening, every breath heavier than the last. The floors were slick with moisture, and in the dim glow of my headlampt, I could make out strange stains, the kind that had soaked too deep into the concrete to be washed away. I paused at an open doorway, staring at what had once been a kitchen. Rusted stoves, broken tile, a sink filled with something black and still. A single chair stood in the center of the room, oddly new and clean. The auditorium lay in the belly of the beast, a cavernous chamber where a stage still stood, its curtains sagging like peeling flesh. The wooden boards were warped with dampness, the screen behind it torn and yellowed. My camera clicked, echoing in the empty space. And then another sound, low and uneven. My blood ran cold. I turned, expecting to see a shadow, a man, a bear. But there was nothing. Just the gaping dark of the hall beyond. Yet the air had changed, thick with something I couldn't name, something that pressed against my skin like damp fabric.

I didnt venture into the basement levels, as it went four stories deep. Thats just way too much fear to handle. The other levels were bad enough, a labyrinth of steam pipes and furnace tunnels, their paths twisting into the earth like veins. The walls dripped with condensation, the air thick and metallic. Around here, sound didn't carry the way it should. Footsteps felt distant, even if they were your own. Some passages led to collapsed rooms, others to dead ends where rusted machinery sat like forgotten sentinels. The stairwell leading down was a gaping mouth, swallowing my flashlight beam in thick, damp blackness.

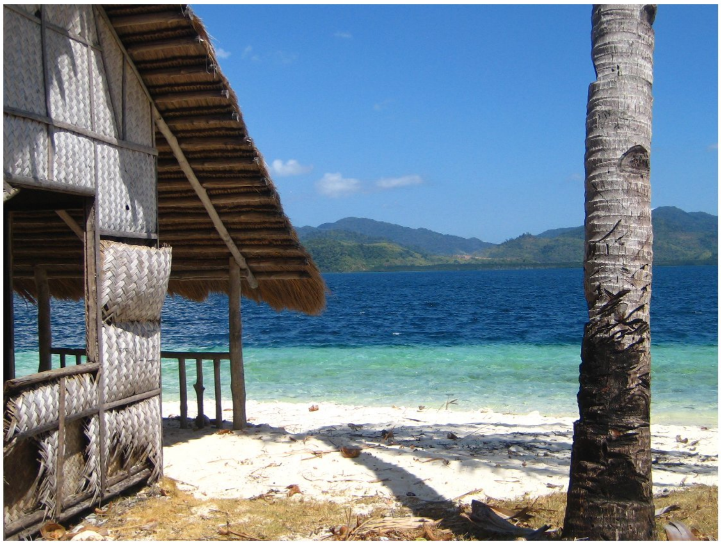
Then, a sound, a rustling, almost careful. The kind of noise made when something doesn't want to be heard. My grip tightened on my bear spray as I removed the safety clip. I swept the beam across the corridor ahead, pausing on an open doorway. Inside, shapes slumped against the walls, old bedding, plastic bottles, a forgotten shoe with the laces still tied. Someone had lived here. Maybe they still did. A draft swept through, and with it, the scent of something foul and organic, something left too long in the damp and dark. My stomach twisted, the atmosphere off. I was more scared than I should have been. I had bear spray, but I didn't want to know why. Then another sound. Fainter this time. A sigh perhaps. A drip of water hitting tin, but most probably just my imagination.

A realization. that I could be being watched. Not by a person or an animal,
but by an inanimate object with its own dark soul. The building itself.

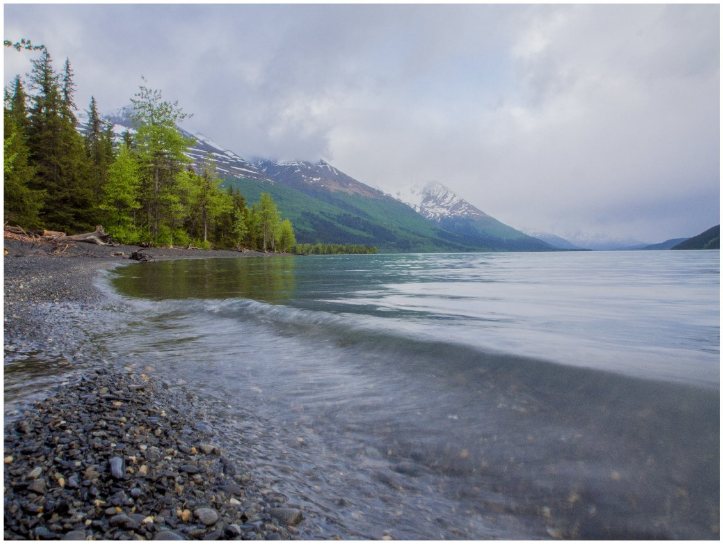
The feeling didn't fade. It pressed in tighter, heavier, a weight curling around my ribs. Time to fucking leave. I imagined movement in the corners of my vision, but every time I turned, there was nothing. Just the gaping halls and the endless ruin. I exhaled, shallow and unsteady, and backed toward the stairs. The way out was the way I came in. The halls seemed longer than before, the way twisting. I could see the opening ahead, but it felt unreachable, like a bad dream when your running in place. By the time I burst outside, all I could hear was my pulse. The cold air was sharp, cutting through the sick weight that had clung to me inside. I didn't look back. I didn't check my camera. I just walked, hands shaking, until I reached the safety my rental car. The Buckner loomed behind me, silent. Unmoving.



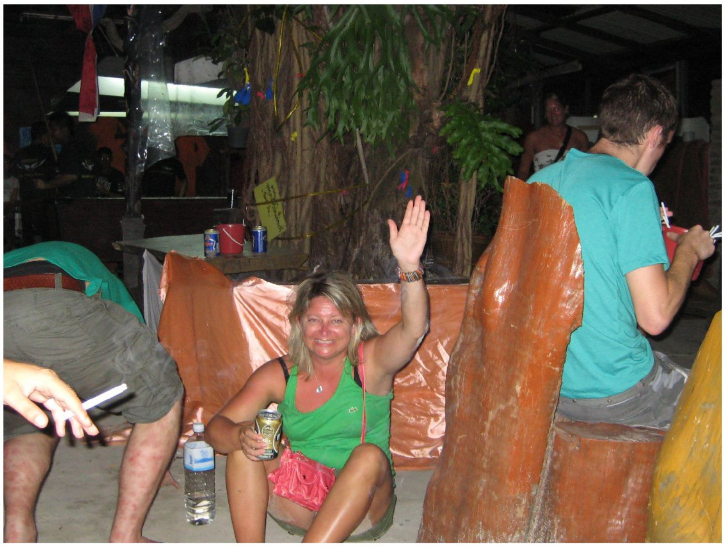
Hoi An, VIETNAM *“Sandals at the Doors”*
She stood in the doorway of her shop. Out front: a bicycle, a pot of something green, a little sign that said “Coffee and Tea” The moment felt posed by the universe. But she wasn’t performing. That’s what stopped you. The calm certainty of someone whose rhythm didn’t care about your arrival.



El Nido, THE PHILIPPINES *“All Natural”*
One beach after another, only to out-do the last. An aquatic paradise where visions of awe are as many as the sand grains between toes.

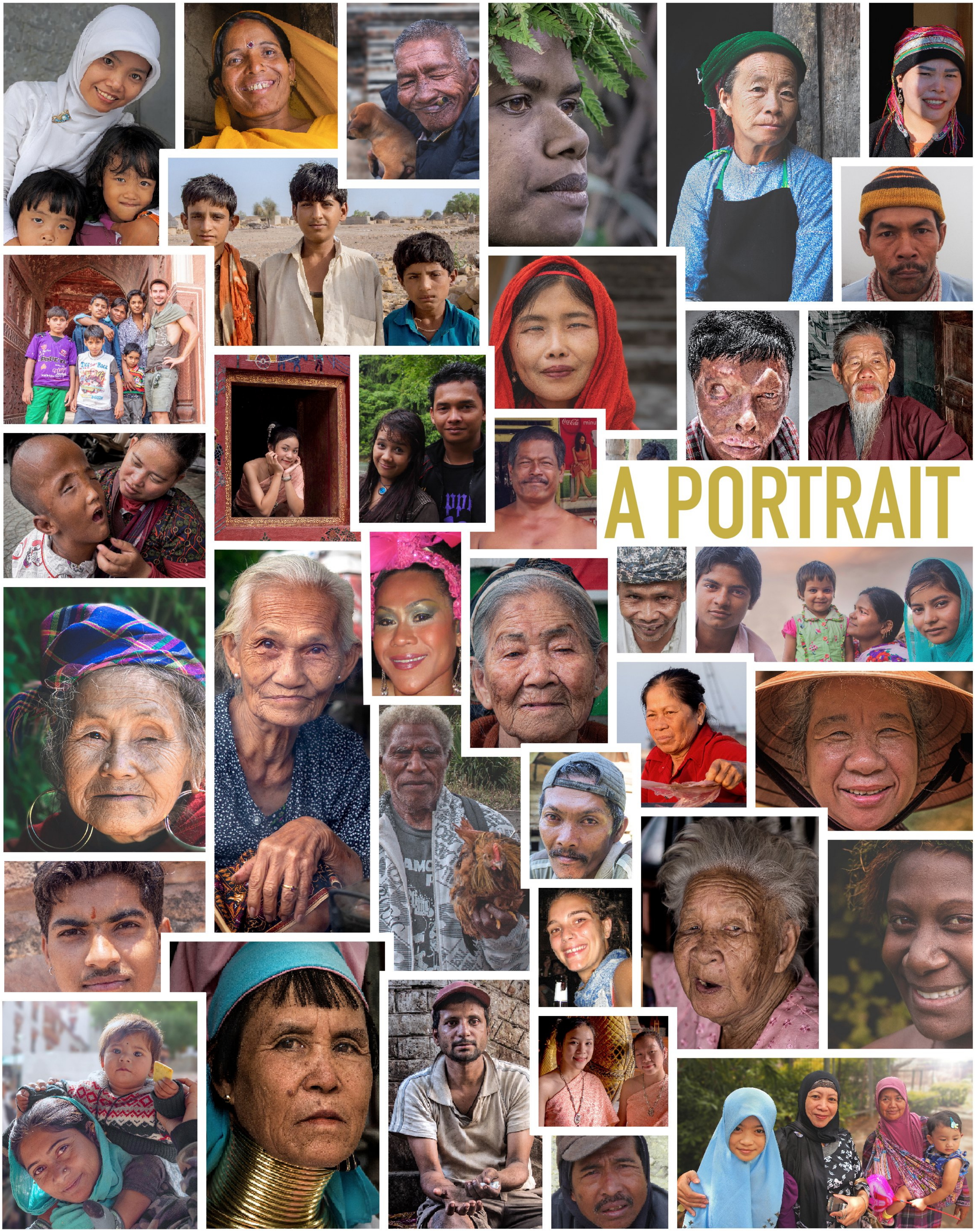


Moose Pass, ALASKA *“You Made It Here, Now What”*
The lake made soft ripples as mountains leaned over the edge like sleeping giants dusted in snow. You threw a stone in the water and watched it disappear, hoping it might stir something. It didn’t. Some places feel like we shouldn’t be there, like it should just be left alone. No epiphany. They just exist. Immense, indifferent, and whole. Untouched by our hands that break the delicate mould of nature.



Ko Tao, THAILAND *“Plastered in Paradise”*
She didn’t fall, she lowered herself. Sweat on her cheeks, ciggie between fingers, sand in all sorts of places. Everyone around her in their own battle of sobriety and hook ups, momentarily orbiting their own planets. In that jungle bar with speakers nailed to palm trunks, she became a kind of monument. Not tragic, but heroic. Simply saying “This is where you’ll find me, with drink in hand and not a fucking care in the world”.

A PORTRAIT



"Can I take your picture?"
A lift of the camera, a small nod, a hopeful glance:

"FUCK OFF"

I've heard that more than once, probably been told to piss off in at least six languages by now. Sometimes people are flattered, other times pissed off, and more often, just confused. "Why me? Why am I interesting?" they ask, without saying a word.

Fair enough, really. If I were walking to the shops at home and some Japanese tourist asked to photograph me, I'd probably react the same. Confused. Guarded. Curious. But it's the angry responses that hurt the ego a little. The immediate bark. The wall going up. And I get it. But there are 8.2 billion people on this rock we call Earth. Anonymity is automatic in those numbers. Still, not everyone wants to be documented. Sometimes asking for a portrait starts a conversation. Other times it ends one.

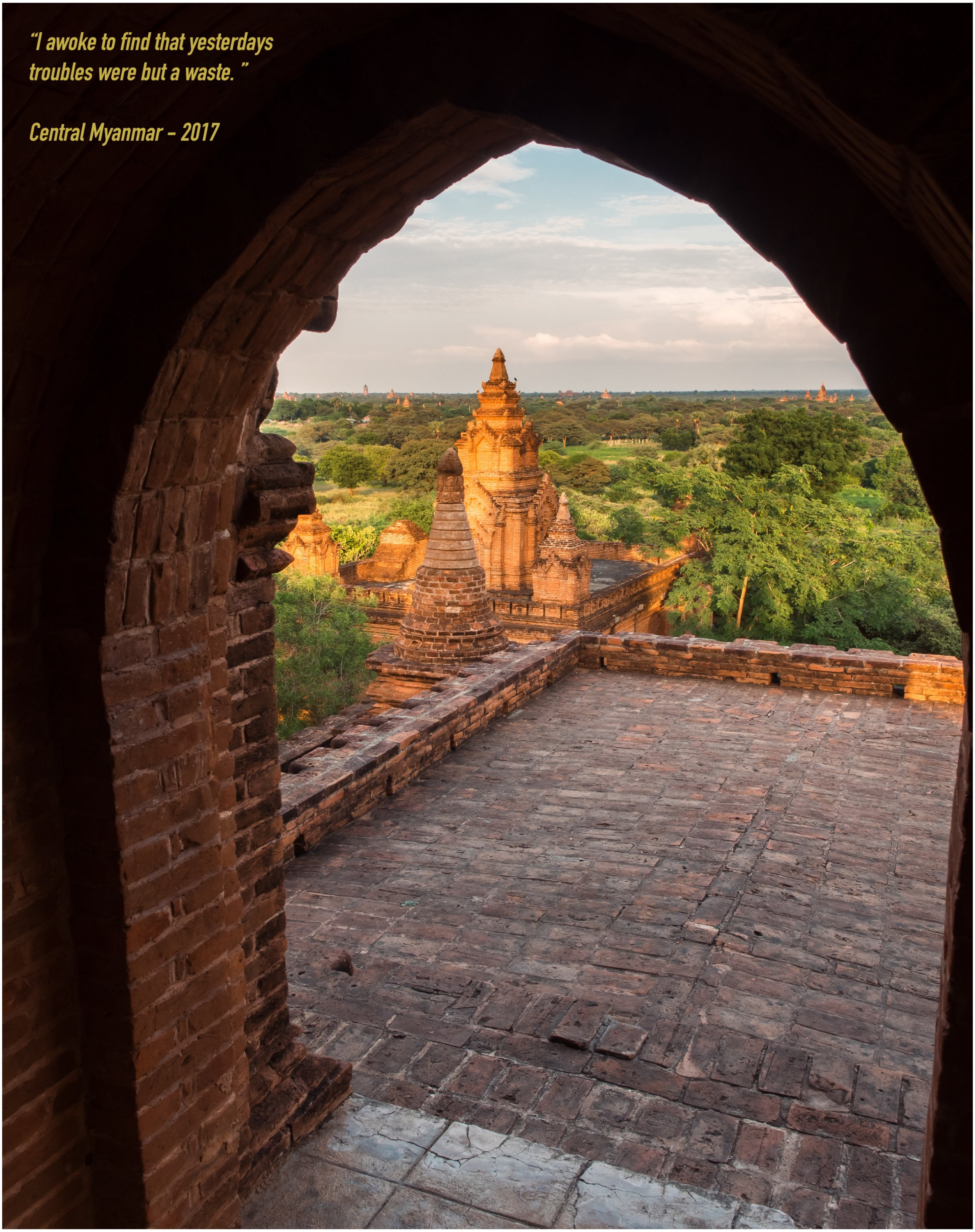
Thailand? A hundred percent strike rate. Smiles, peace signs, laughter. People lean in. They pose. They're proud.
Egypt? The opposite. Not a single close-up in a month of travel. Suspicion. Resistance. Not fear exactly, but a firm boundary you learn not to cross. Different people, different beliefs. Some are weary. Some are open. Some don't want to be looked at, especially by someone who doesn't belong. Who doesn't live with the confines of the same religion or beliefs.

Still, I keep asking. Not to fill memory cards, but to try and capture how people occupy the world. Because cultures are fading, and *FAST.* I've seen it. Even in the expanse of my time traveling. I've felt it in the faces of mountain villages and hill tribe minorities, the silence of old traditions losing their last living practitioners.

Young people are leaving. Not just moving, but abandoning. The cities are calling, and who can blame them? Better opportunities, more freedom, less tradition pressing down on their shoulders. But when they go, something ancient leaves with them. Entire ways of life, passed down through blood and repetition. A thousand years, dissolved in a single generation.

And what's rising to replace them? Not much. Actually... Nothing.
Because we're not building new cultures. We're merging into one. A global culture. A digital culture. Homogenized, optimized, algorithm-approved. Even the man in the Sumatra jungle, barefoot and sweat-soaked, collecting sap from rubber trees in the heat, has a newer iPhone in his pocket than I. That's not a judgment. It's just the truth.

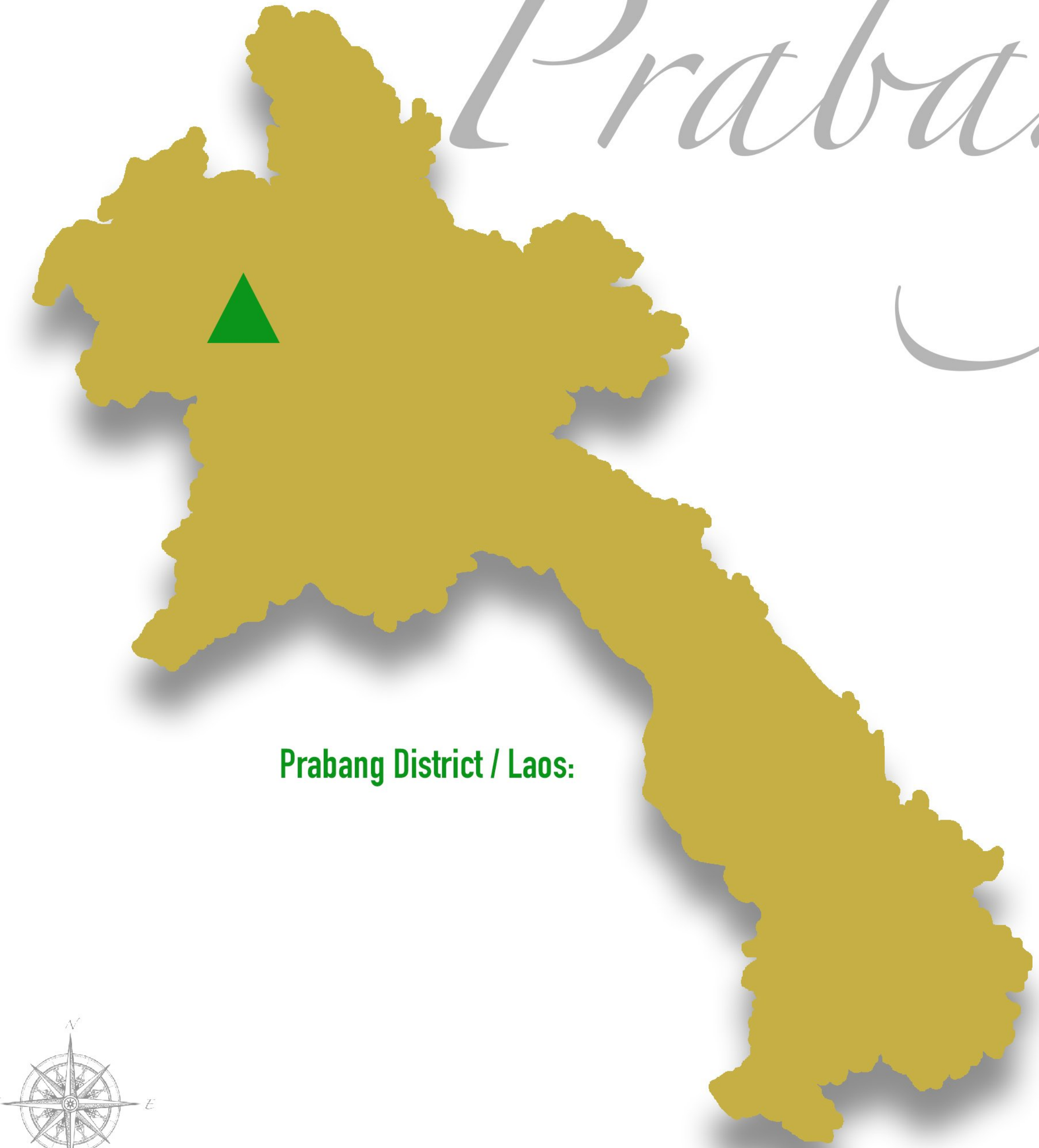
So Ill keep taking portraits. Or trying to. Not for likes or legacy, but to remember. To record a sliver of how it was, before it all becomes how it is.



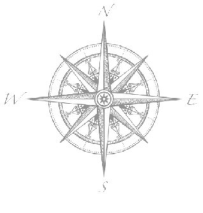
"I awoke to find that yesterdays troubles were but a waste."

Central Myanmar – 2017

Luang Prabang



Prabang District / Laos:



Luang Prabang (Laos)

19.8833° N, / 102.1333° E

“ເມື່ອນ້ຳຂຶ້ນ ປາກິນມົດ; ເມື່ອນ້ຳລົງ ມົດກິນປາ.”

"When the water rises, the fish eat the ants; when the water falls, the ants eat the fish"

A Lao proverb reflecting the cyclical nature of fortune and adversity.

"There's Tigers in the Jungle"

I don't even remember what the airport looked like: The town is only in small size but it is one of the two lifelines in the Laos tourism scene. With the country being landlocked it doesn't have the alluring coastlines that Thailand or Vietnam hold. Or the variety of landscapes that the vast Indonesia has. But what it lacks in infrastructure, it makes up for in old world charm. Luang Prabang being at the heart of it.

The town lays in the Northern interior of Laos lush rainforests and mountains, and the lifeline that keeps it all afloat, the Mekong River, cutting right though the middle. To describe the importance of this river would be an injustice. It is a vein, rushing the waters of life, like blood, to the millions who live on its banks. And at this junction point, Luang Prabang sits on a peninsular, snaked by its waters.

At the top of a long, uneven staircase, maybe a thousand steps or more, sits an old Buddhist temple overlooking the town. From up there, you get a proper sense of the land. Forests stretch in every direction, thick and untouched, the roads below barely cutting into them. No resorts, no logging scars, just green hills and the soft rise of mountains still holding their ground. At sunrise the trees go pale pink, and by evening they burn orange. There are waterfalls tucked into the hills, caves you can walk though with a headlamp, and quiet lookout points that don’t require permits or tour guides. Just the trail, the sweat, and the reward at the top.

They waded through the fields and tall grass without a care. Bare feet slapped through the shallows, scratched and caked in mud. No hesitation in patrolling the riverbanks, it was theirs by birthright.

A charred meat stick over smoky coals, chased with an ice-cold beer. Reason enough to be here in this realm.

You won't be alone in the caves, at least not during high season. But I came in the shoulder months, and most of the time, it was just me and a handful of local kids. They waited near the entrances, selling bottled water while Mum or Dad walked you through the place for a few dollars. Three bucks, give or take, to hear the local stories, spot animal shapes in the shadows, and learn which crack in the rock means what. The kids ran wild, laughing at the echo of their own songs. For me, the foreigner, it's moments like that which stitch a place into memory.

I arrived in town around six. The sky had dipped into a low purple and the last of the light hung just long enough to trace the edges of the streets. Temples were everywhere. Some sprawled across courtyards, others no bigger than a shoebox, tucked onto carved fences outside family homes. Lanterns had already been lit, casting a soft glow across the French-style two-story homes, all pressed tight together. They looked like they'd been pulled from a village in Provence and left to sweat it out in the jungle.

I dropped my bag at the homestay. The family lived downstairs. Upstairs were three rooms, side by side, each one opening onto a long balcony that faced the river. Just across the narrow road, the Mekong moved slow and wide, its waters tinted orange by the last of the light. With night settled and the room key in my pocket, I headed out. Not just to the market, but to the real draw, the food.

You can smell the coals a few blocks away. Smoky, sweet, unmistakable. I walked slowly, taking in the evening streets. Old men sat on front steps, cigarettes glowing between fingers. Doors were open, windows wide, letting the life of the street drift inside. It felt like an unspoken agreement. Nothing sealed off. Just one big, shared current.

Out front of a narrow shop, a woman sat in a red plastic chair. Behind her, a heavy timber door opened into a dark little room lined with bottles. Each one filled with some exotic creature, drowned and floating in what locals call rice whiskey. Chest-melting stuff. Tongue destroying. I gave it a miss that night, but a few days later, as the sun dipped low and the streets turned amber, I gave in.

But this night belonged to the grill. The narrow alley was covered in tarps and corrugated tin, packed tight with people. Hundreds, shoulder to shoulder, all inching forward, drawn to the sizzle. Everyone with a meat stick in hand. Some reached for old favourites. Others went for the strange and unidentifiable. It didn't matter. Everything was cooked to crisp perfection over glowing coals and served with your choice of sauces and spice. Sweat clung to your back. A few pedestal fans wheezed in vain. But no one cared. Food had taken over. The language of meat and smoke spoke louder than discomfort ever could.

You sat where there was space. Long metal tables, plastic stools, beer in hand, elbow to elbow with strangers. Conversation sparked easily. Where you came from. What's worth doing. Which café still makes coffee the old way. Where you are headed next. That was the entertainment. That and the food.

After twenty-four hours in transit, it was exactly the kind of welcome I needed. I slept with the doors open, the sounds of scooters and river water drifting in from the street. An incense stick burned slowly on the table outside. Lit by the owner while I was gone. A small gesture that made it feel, for a moment at least, like home.

Good morning. Good morning.
I looked around. Then down. The house matron was already up, hosing the pavement clean where her home met the road.

A fixed gear bike with a basket on the handlebars. Just the right speed for this place. Not fast enough to miss anything, not slow enough to get bored.

Half a block from the guesthouse and I've already stopped. A dozen monks kneeling in sunrise prayer. The temple behind them is covered in old murals, once bright, now faded into the timber and stone. Inside, a steady low chant. Heads bowed, hands pressed together. Candles lit before sunrise burn to their ends. First stop was coffee. Thick, sweet. It jolts you into clarity. I took it at a table on the sidewalk, watching the day stretch its limbs like a dog waking from a nap. Not much traffic here. A few scooters, some bicycles. Mostly quiet. Palm trees shift lazily overhead. Croissant flakes on my shirt. Across the road, a small temple catches the light. Golden teak. Carvings of horned beasts. All done by hand, probably a hundred years ago, maybe more.

I left the bike out front, unlocked. No one touches it. Things work differently here. Faith and karma keep people honest, or at least accountable. I walked across the road to the temple grounds. Garden paths, old stone carvings, and a few young women in traditional dress with their mothers proudly taking pictures of them on their phones. They say this place has been here since the 1300s. Long before tourism or the French ever came. An ornate temple in the jungle a hundred years ago. Imagine that time and place if you will.

I watched as others, like myself, wandered in silence, trying to match the rhythm of the place. Into the quiet, the faith, and the ever-present eyes of Buddha. Candles and incense burned in every room, sometimes hundreds at once, all watched over by young monks. Locals prayed without concern for visitors. Monks drifted through the gardens without minding tourists. When I returned, my bike leaned exactly where I left it, the sun now high and hot, boiling the brown leather of my bike seat.

I rode following the Mekong south toward the quieter end of the peninsula. The polished inns and mini marts thinned out. In their place, timber stalls juiced fruit by hand. Old men waited at a bus stop half-swallowed by banyan roots. I passed the old lady's snake whiskey stall from the previous night. Ah, fuck it, I thought. She poured a shot from a jar filled with snakes. It hit hard. A few young Euros stopped to inspect the jars too. Curiosity is universal. Anything strange draws a crowd. I took another shot with them. Firewater, stripping layers off my esophagus on the way down. Should make for a more interesting bike ride.

At the end was the river, and a ten-metre drop to the water. A titan of earth and motion, churning orange and brown. Days before I arrived, there had been record rains. Now the Mekong didn't flow. It surged. It devoured. Boats, palm trees, whole jetties drifted past, sucked down and carried into the jungle. The contrast from the last hour was absurd. Spiritual quiet traded for noise and movement so loud you had to shout. A local stood beside me, shirt pulled up to his chest in the heat, watching the water like a movie. He offered a cigarette. "No boats today," I yelled jokingly. "So wild," he shouted back. We nodded. Nature was putting on a show.

The sun began to vanish again behind a thickening grey, the soft tones of the afternoon shifting rapidly as the clouds pulled in like curtains. I made for the centre of town, up the steep incline of stone steps that wound like a spine toward the hilltop temple that surveyed all below. It's a climb, sure, close to a thousand steps, but worth every single one when you time it with the monsoon.

I reached the top just as the first drops began to fall, not yet rain, just big, heavy specks like test shots. I ducked under the wooden archway into the temple pavilion and found myself alone, the golden Buddha staring peacefully ahead as if he too had been waiting for the change in weather. Behind me, the town blurred and shimmered under the first sheets of rain, its sharp lines softening into water-coloured outlines. The hills disappeared altogether, wrapped in low, wet clouds.

I sat there for an hour, maybe more, barefoot on cool tiles, listening to the symphony of thunder and wind rippling through the palms. A few monkeys swung in low branches nearby, their silhouettes flickering between branches as they huddled and groomed and screeched in protest. A few came close to the shelter, watching me with a kind of tribal mistrust. We sat there together, creatures caught in the same storm. There was something deeply grounding in how the storm made the whole world press pause. A moment of forced presence. When it passed, as quickly as it had arrived, I walked back down into a freshly washed town. The streets sparkled with rain. Pavements shone like stone mirrors. The scent of the wet earth rose up like incense and made the air feel sticky.

I made my way to the riverside once more, to where the barge launches. Not a ferry in the way we usually imagine it, this one was more like a floating platform lashed together, driven by a weary diesel engine and guided across the Mekong by thick rusted cables. With the river running high and angry, it groaned with every movement. Locals clutched bags of vegetables, sat calmly with legs swinging off the edge, like this was nothing.

Meanwhile, the tourists, me included, tried to act nonchalant while subtly tightening our grips on the handrails. The river shoved against the sides like a giant testing a toy, but the man steering, hunched and shirtless, looked like he might just doze off mid-crossing. Eyes half closed, a cigarette hanging from his bottom lip. This wasn't his first river ride in a storm. Probably not even his tenth today.

The barge slammed into the opposite bank with a bump and a laugh from someone who clearly knew the routine. I stepped off and began walking deeper into the quiet side of Luang Prabang, where the tourism fades and the jungle moves closer. The path was a single slab of poured concrete, winding between hand-built homes and gardens that hung out over the river's edge.

Tin roofs rusted like the pages of old books. The smell of banana trees and rain-soaked laundry filled the humid air. And still, the temples followed. Smaller here, tucked between homes and shrubs, shrines half-covered in vines, stone Buddhas shaded under makeshift awnings.

Then came the monks. Young ones. Maybe six or seven years old, clothed in bright orange robes, their sandals slapping against pedals as they rode past in two's and three's on bicycles that looked too big for them. Every one of them yelled out as they passed:

"HELLO!" "HELLO!" with wide grins. I waved back, laughing at how confidently they rode, three of them stacked onto a single bike, swerving like acrobats.

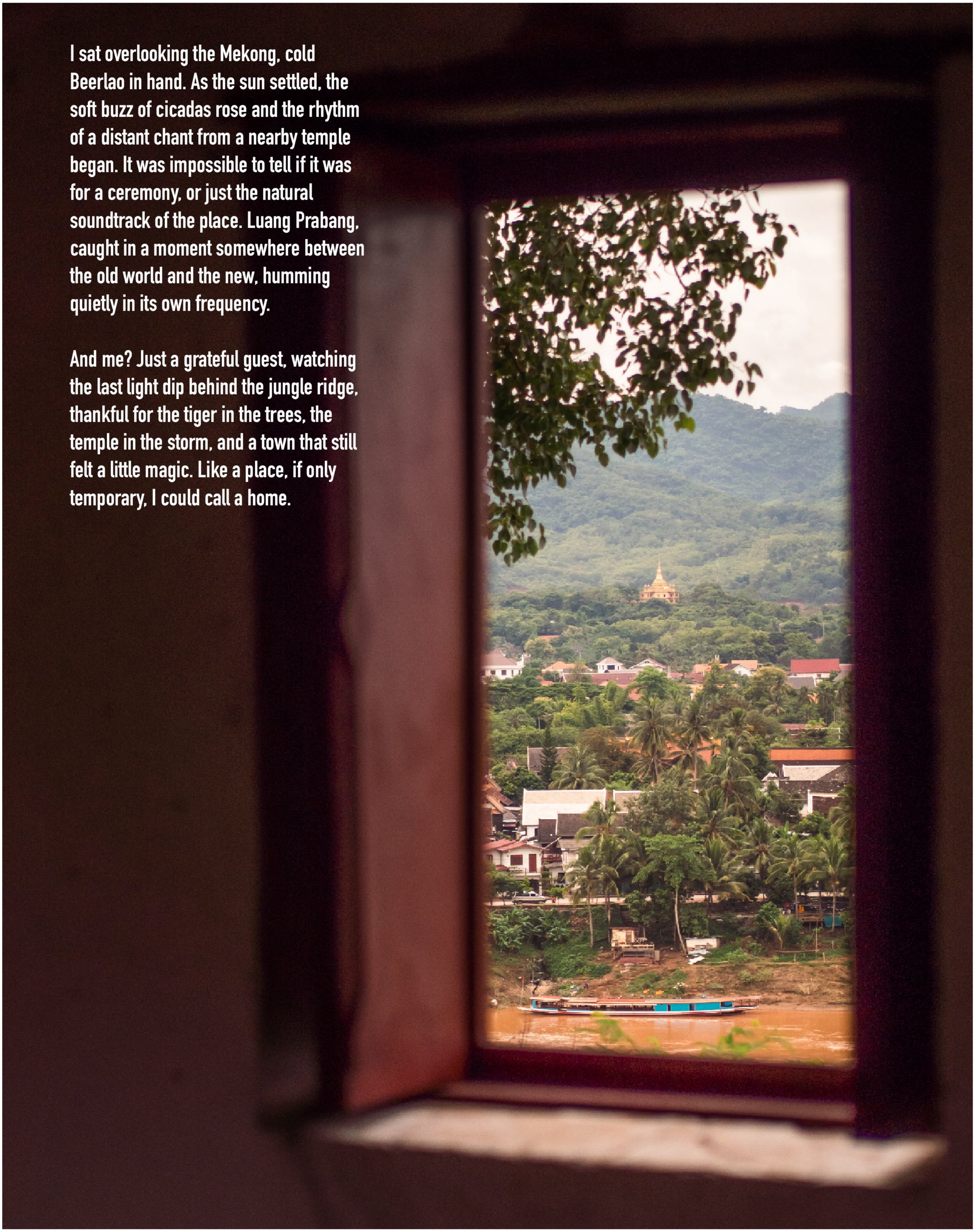
Further down the path, two of them had stopped, leaning casually under a tree. Just loitering. Killing time before dinner, maybe. As I got closer, one nudged the other and sprung to life, then looked at me dead serious. He raised a hand, pointed into the forest beside the path and screamed, "TIGER! TIGER! LOOK OUT!"

I froze. Just for a moment. Before a blur of orange leapt from behind a tree, growling like a cartoon villain, arms stretched wide. It was another young monk, leaping from the jungle. "HA! HA! We scare you!" he shouted, laughing as they all took off up the road, robes flapping wildly behind them. I stood there, laughing internally at where my days end up sometimes. I turned back the way I came. The clouds had cleared and the sun was setting low behind the hills, spilling gold into the river like oil across water. The barge waited, ready for another dramatic trip across.

I envision myself here. This seemingly simpler existence. A way of life closer to the natural world, closer to community, and closer to the things I actually value. Peace. And peace of mind.

I sat overlooking the Mekong, cold Beerlao in hand. As the sun settled, the soft buzz of cicadas rose and the rhythm of a distant chant from a nearby temple began. It was impossible to tell if it was for a ceremony, or just the natural soundtrack of the place. Luang Prabang, caught in a moment somewhere between the old world and the new, humming quietly in its own frequency.

And me? Just a grateful guest, watching the last light dip behind the jungle ridge, thankful for the tiger in the trees, the temple in the storm, and a town that still felt a little magic. Like a place, if only temporary, I could call a home.



Denali National Park, ALASKA

Huge timber lodges made from ancient trees. Antler chandeliers. Staff in Armani suits. $380 USD a night. And people. Hundreds of them. I didn't think this far north would be so dense with crowds.

I paid the $80 entrance fee to the park, then another $60 just to camp near the gate. Add $40 for the shuttle into the place the next morning. So far, all I'd done was open my wallet. Nature, it seems, comes with a steep price tag. The shuttle buses follow a single dirt road deep into the park. You can hop off anywhere, wander into the wilderness, and when you're done, return to the road and flag down the next passing bus. One night or a month, it's up to you. It's a smart system, but you're on your own out there. Zero safety net.

I picked a riverbed on the map that flowed down from the mountains toward the road. Just one night out there, but it stretched like days. No trails. No signs. No signal. Just a map, some food, bear spray, and the hope that my sleeping bag would hold up to the cold. I underestimated the terrain. I was instantly humbled. A 100-meter stretch could hit you with a cliff, a bog, or a wall of thorns. The mosquitoes were biblical. And the bears? Real. Numerous. Not something to fuck around with.

Would I have preferred a night in one of those lodges? Maybe. Probably. Yes. But my budget didn't allow for the hot tub with a pine forest view, the wine bar, the soft mattress, or the $65 steak. For me, it was a tent, and the need to sleep with one eye open. My Denali didn't come with a budget for luxury, it came with an uneasy silence of six million untamed acres. And if you're not careful, it will swallow you into its abyss without a trace.

Hanoi, Vietnam / Trackside Lives:

It’s easy to get lost in the noise of Hanoi. Scooters buzz like hornets, vendors shout from sidewalks, and the air carries the mixed scent of gasoline, grilled meat, and wet stone. But follow the train tracks, those rusted steel veins that cut through the belly of the city, and it becomes something else entirely.

Here, tucked along the edges of the rails, life unfolds sideways. Clotheslines drape between balconies like vines, shirts and jeans swaying with a breeze you wouldn’t feel if not for the fabric dancing. A child crouches on a second-floor ledge, poking his finger through the mesh of a fan cover. A woman leans from a window just wide enough for her elbows, watering a row of potted herbs, lemongrass, mint, basil, each plant a rebellion against the concrete.

There is such charm in daily life here. And the slow erosion of space being negotiated, day after day, by bodies and routines. You see the patched cement where someone once decided a crack wasn’t worth worrying about. And from the upper floors, satellite dishes and water tanks perch like birds, watching the passing of days.

A Vietnamese flag hangs from a balcony, red and defiant. Below it, laundry drips beside power cables wrapped like snakes around power poles. But the chaos somehow has its own order. A strange kind of beauty, the raw utility of it all. These homes not built to impress, just built to work.

In the west, we box ourselves in with fences, rules and square meterage. We speak in renovations, improvements and “open-plan living.” But here, the living is just that, living. Fridges are small. Meals are shared. A few plastic stools double as chairs, tables, and step-ladders. Every necessity is accounted for, but nothing more than needed.

Looking down these tracks, you don’t see scarcity. You see efficiency. Ingenuity. And a kind of intimacy with space that is utterly foreign to those of us used to excess. We are taught to fill emptiness. Here, it’s filled already, with neighbors, with the scent of rice cooking, with the chatter of someone’s bluetooth speaker playing a song that might be from last week or 1972.

Millions live this way. Quietly. Without grandeur. Morning tea, afternoon naps, damp clothes pegged to a railing that shakes when the train passes. It’s not a life on display, but a life of necessary.

We all need the same things. Water. Warmth. A place to rest. A sense that we belong. A home. But it’s the way we go about getting them, and how little it returns of how much it took to accumulate it. Between rusted steel and stacked concrete, this is how they live in Hanoi: So very different from the next city, the next town and the next country.

NAPALI COAST, KAWAII:

There’s no easy way into Kalalau. The ring road that encircles Kaua‘i island is interrupted by a 30 kilometer stretch of sheer cliffs known as the Nāpali Coast. For most of the year, the ocean is too rough to navigate by kayak. Leisure boats are forbidden, and authorities have cracked down on the unofficial water taxis that once ferried people in. That leaves one option: the Kalalau Trail, an “advanced” trek across five steep valleys, often said to be one of “the most incredible hike in America.”

The valley has long been a magnet for those seeking refuge from the constraints of modern life. It’s a place where people with little needs can disappear into nature and embrace a simpler existence. Some call it a paradise, others a "Lord of the Flies" scenario within a first-world country, but either way, it draws a particular breed of wanderer. One traveler I met described it as a strange purgatory, a place where time stretches and reality feels suspended. Especially if you give in to it.

Without the usual markers of modern life, days blur together, governed only by the rhythm of the sun and the movement of the ocean. For some, it was an escape. For others, a slow unraveling. All I knew was that I wanted to see it before it was shut down, exploited or gone.

I arrived at the trailhead with a Canadian, an Irishman, and a guy from Florida. And me, an Aussie. None of us wanted to fork out nearly $200 for the hiking permit, so we loitered near the entrance, attempting to look inconspicuous despite the obvious giveaway, large hiking packs, each accessorized with a single plastic grocery bag stuffed with our meager rations. Instant noodles, peanut butter, maybe a packet of biscuits, whatever we figured would stretch across however many days we chose to stay. The hike was stunning but punishing. Breathtaking views, sheer cliffs tumbling into the Pacific, waterfalls hidden in jungle canopies, all came at the cost of steep, muddy climbs and precarious descents where a single misstep could send you into the abyss.

We had barely dropped our packs when a commotion broke out;
“NPs!... NPs!...” - “HEY... NPs ARE HERE!”

A wiry guy in his late twenties, sunbaked and dreadlocked, ran along the tree line, voice rising in alarm. Within seconds, a mass exodus erupted. People leapt from hammocks, abandoned makeshift camps, and darted into the jungle, grabbing only the essentials, usually their weed. Within moments, the forest was eerily empty except for a few confused newcomers (such as us) and the steady wind through the trees above.

Then, two National Park rangers strolled in, clipboard in hand, moving with the weary patience of schoolteachers dealing with unruly students. They walked among the deserted camps, knowing full well they couldn’t issue citations unless they handed them directly to someone. Plus, they were legally not allowed to touch or move others possessions. This game of cat and mouse played out every few days, and both sides seemed content with the unspoken rules. Within an hour, the rangers left, and the self-imposed exiles slowly emerged, stretching and brushing dirt from their sunburnt skin as if nothing had happened.

Kalalau wasn’t just a remote beach; it was a uneasy community with its own hierarchy, economy, and unspoken codes. Some outsiders griped that many of the long-term squatters were funding their extended stays with food stamps, using government benefits to stockpile rice and drugs for their jungle communes. Others argued that the place had become a haven for sketchy drifters. There was some truth to both claims. Most residents were friendly, overly eager to share their philosophies on life, their profound knowledge gathered in the haze of a high, but then there were those who had gone too deep, both into the valley and their own minds.

I was baffled that people seeking clarity, answers, and enlightenment turn to substances that cloud their thinking, that pull them from reality, and leave them in a fog. It’s like going for a swim but refusing to get wet.

Women rarely stayed long, which led to an abundance of unchecked male energy and a few dubious social dynamics. People were pissing on indigenous sites, leaving used condoms on the forest floor, and digging little holes on the beach to shit like cats. Sometimes I agreed with this kind of simpler and more natural existence; other times, I found myself shaking my head in disgust at the state of things.

And then there were the real jungle dwellers, people like Dave, who had all but severed ties with the outside world. He appeared one morning, barefoot and lean, wearing nothing but shorts and a bum bag, eyes wide with excitement at the new blood of travelers I was with. Also because the guy from Florida had bought a bag of weed, so naturally, he was sitting in on the fire circles pretty quick.

"You wanna see something cool?" he asked. Against our better judgment, and in all honesty, because some days were pretty fucking boring, the both of us followed him inland, winding through thick foliage until we reached a clearing. A tree stood at the center, massive and ancient, its roots twisting over the ground like petrified serpents. Without hesitation, Dave clambered up the trunk and disappeared into the branches. A moment later, his voice drifted down. "Come up" "Come up".
I hesitated but finally gave in, scrambling up the gnarled limbs awkwardly. When I reached the top, I saw what he meant. The canopy parted just enough to reveal the ocean stretching endlessly beyond the cliffs, waves crashing in rhythmic pulses far below. It was a hidden lookout, known only to those who could climb to it. Dave grinned. *"This is my temple,"* he said, arms outstretched. *"Been here a year now, man. No stress. Just nature."* as he took a joint out of his bum bag.

A noble sentiment, but judgmentally, I wondered how much of was supplemented by the American taxpayer. This was an internal narrative I fought with at this place. A big part of me agreed with living closer and more in tune with nature, but then another part of me was disgusted with the hedonism of it all. Especially with the concept of coming all the way out here to this island paradise only to end up sticking a needle in your arm. There was also the old guy who lived on the edge of the beach with nothing but a tarp, a firepit, and an endless supply of quinoa. He'd trade bowls of it for joints, his makeshift kitchen a meeting point for those who preferred nourishment with their intoxication.

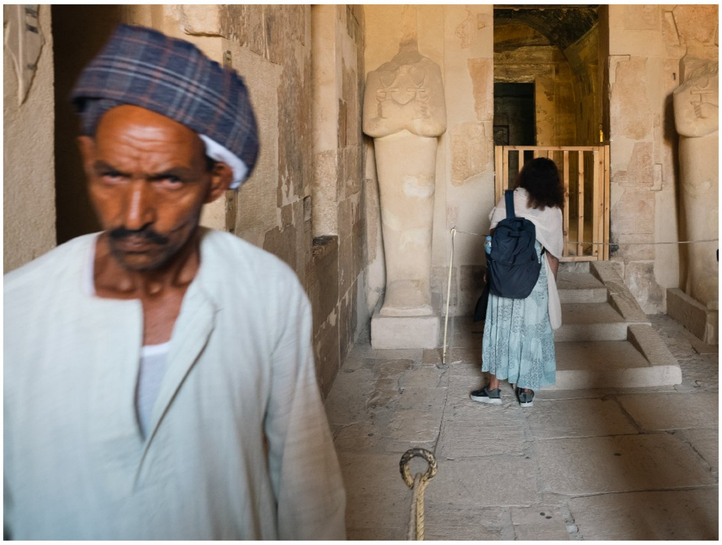
On our third day, a clean-cut American couple in their twenties arrived, Osprey and Patagonia labels stamped on every piece of gear they had. It was chalk and cheese compared to the self-proclaimed residents. They set up their tent about twenty feet from my hammock and, I guess deciding I looked trustworthy, approached me.
"Hey, can you keep an eye on our stuff when we go for a swim or a walk? We'll do the same for you."

A fair offer, considering the mythos of Kalalau wasn't always a Blue Lagoon paradise, as the following year, an American pushed his Japanese girlfriend to her death off a cliff during a bad acid trip. True story, google it.

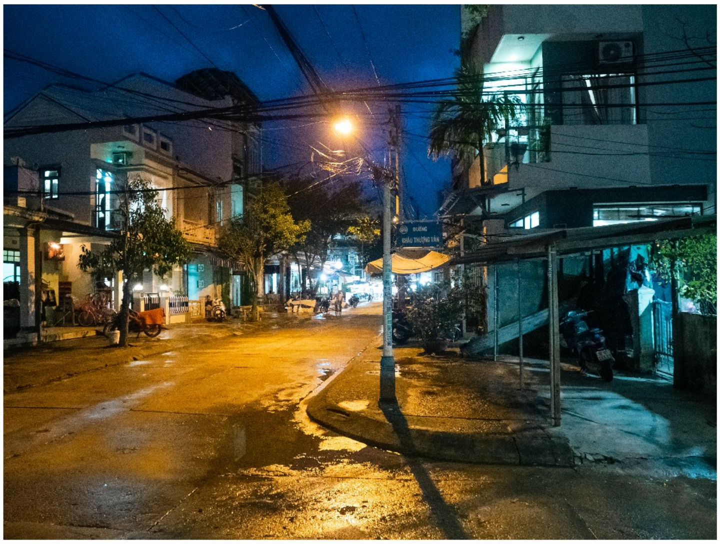
I had planned to stay for two or three days. I ended up staying a week... And by the end of it, our food supplies were dwindling, and the cost and monopoly of having provisions dropped in by boat was absurd. The Canadian and I embraced our inner castaways, fashioning spears from bamboo and wading through rock pools in pursuit of tiny crabs. It wasn't exactly a feast, but for an afternoon, we lived our own Robinson Crusoe fantasy. When the time came to hike back out, sunburnt and mosquito-bitten, I was more than ready to leave. I passed a group of fresh arrivals, their packs still crisp, their faces filled with anticipation.

"How was it? Anything we should know? they asked in passing. "Yeah... You'll find out" our Irish companion said with cheek.
He chuckled and smiled back . . . His girlfriend did not.

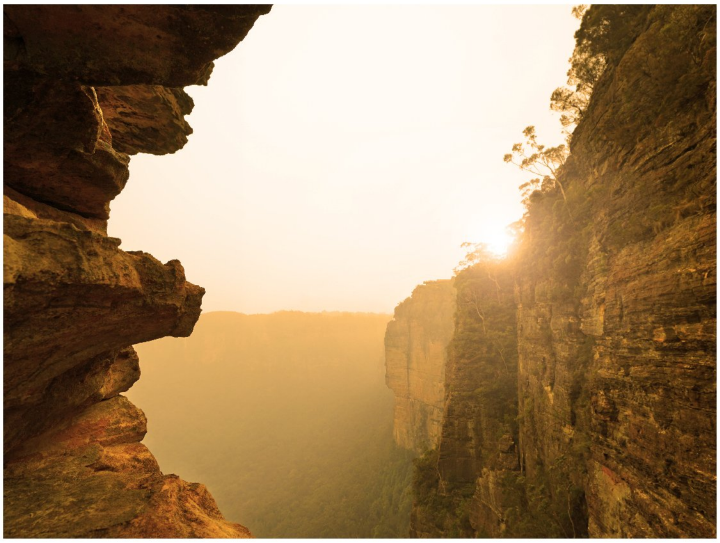
"One of the largest crackdowns happened in 2017 when officials removed over 15 tons of garbage and dismantled dozens of illegal campsites. Rangers and law enforcement also increased patrols, issuing citations and evicting squatters who had lived there for years. Despite these efforts, illegal camping persists, with some claiming a deep spiritual connection to the land, while others simply seek an off-the-grid lifestyle."



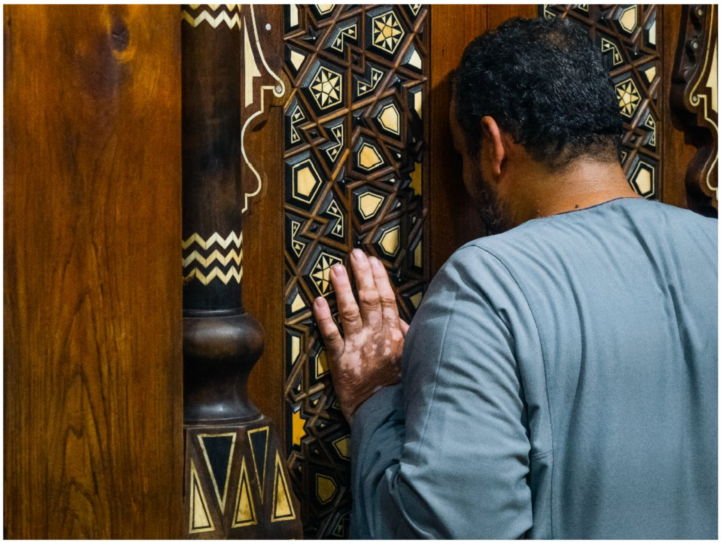
Luxor, EGYPT *"Come, come. Come on my friend, come here"*
He sized me up, probably already figured what it was worth. I didn't flinch. There's a quiet standoff between the hustler and the traveler who's been around long enough to stop apologising. We passed the ancient gods like two players in someone else's tomb. No tricks played. Not that day. Onto the next mark as Egyptian pounds are transferred from leather wallets into eager hands for a peek behind the rope.



Unknown Location, EAST ASIA *"The city held its breath"*
Electric wires sagged under the weight of monsoon steam. Streets hissed with after rain breath, and every doorway leaked shadows. You could feel it, something curled beneath the neon and the stillness. Not peace. Just the pause before the city slipped into its skin again, awaiting for life to return to its pavement.



Blue Mountains, AUSTRALIA *"Nowhere is warmer than home"*
No noise but the wind passing though stone. That cliff had watched tribes vanish, gold be found, towns built and Instagrammers pose. I sat down, alone with the sun, letting it recharge me as it always has.



Cairo, EGYPT *"Inherited faith, or habit,"*
He pressed his forehead to the carved door like he was praying to muscle memory. Maybe it wasn't faith, maybe it was grief. Or guilt. Or just habit, passed down like a family name. I didn't ask. You don't interrupt a man talking to whatever ghosts still answer.

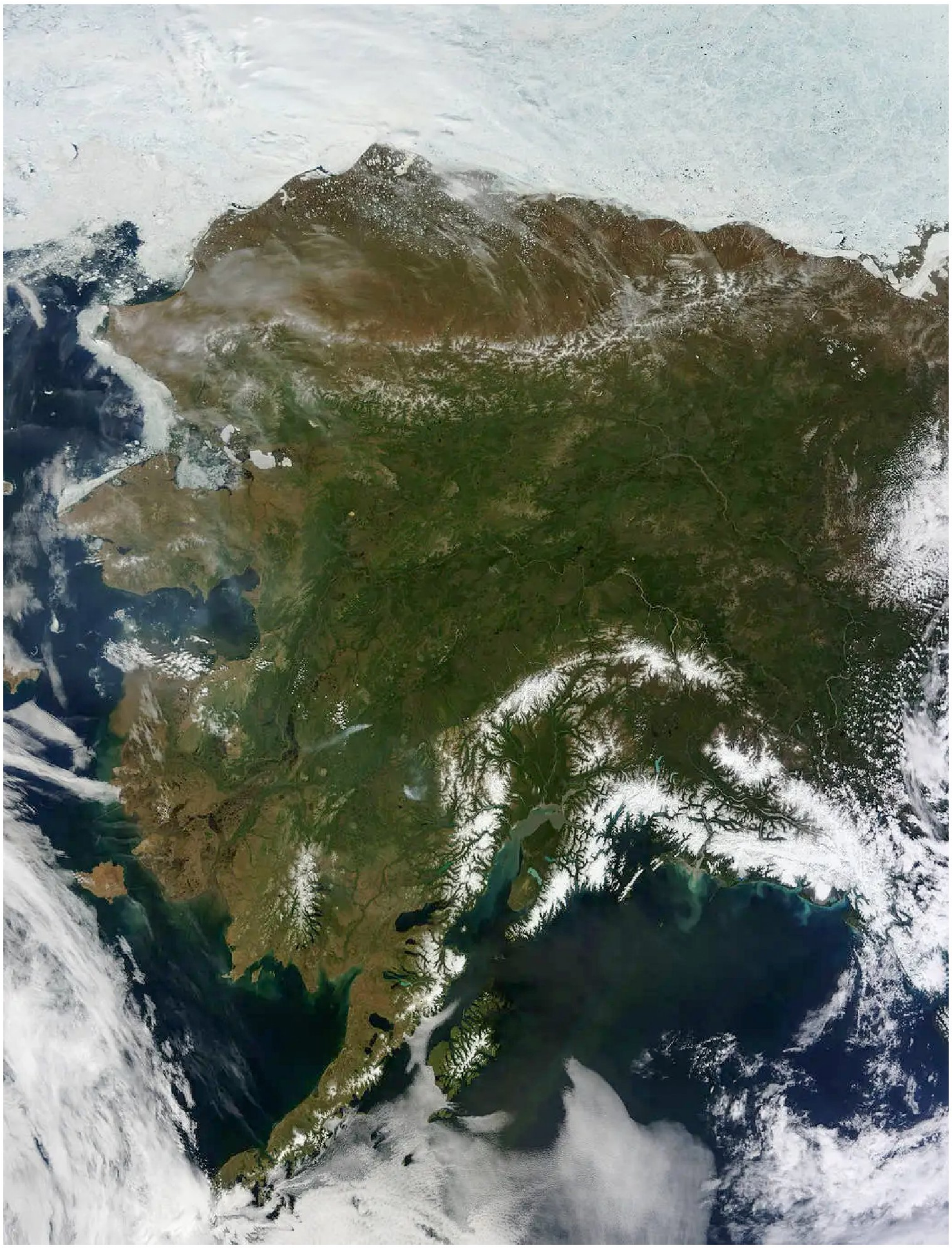
"Time disappears with all things, both good and bad. We cannot halt it, or even slow it down, and as much as we try to hold onto a moment, time never weakens its grip and moves forth, unaware of its own magnitude. Sometimes, it feels like all time does is take, so in our defense, best we understand its importance before it is upon us"

Everest Region, Nepal – 2013

Chugach National Forest

South East Alaska:

Chugach National Forest (Alaska)



60.7833° N, / 148.8333° W
"Nuna qanuqtuq"

"The land is wise"
An Inupiaq saying reflecting the deep respect for nature's wisdom.

Cordova, ALASKA:

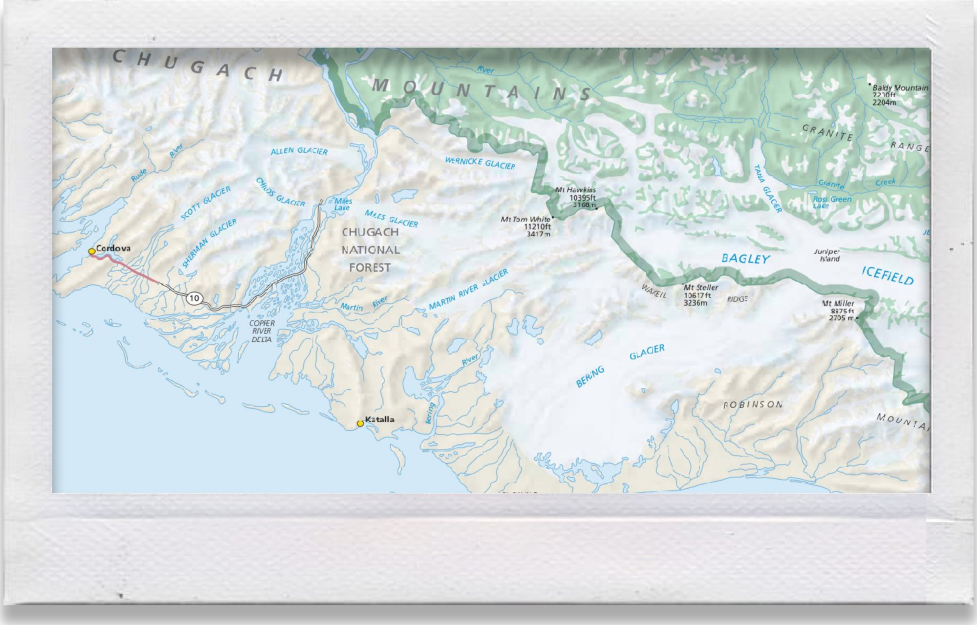
I handed back the rental car keys at Anchorage Airport, and the shift was immediate. The hum of tires on tarred roads, the shuffling on pavement, the ticket counters of national parks, all of it I was done with. The road thus far had been the warm-up, a two-week stretching of the legs along Alaska's highways and scenic towns. What I needed was no longer about boardwalk overlooks and coffee stops, it was about getting lost, or at least an attempt, nature experienced the right way. Denali was big, sure. And majestic. But it was curated wilderness, sterilized by expensive park shuttles and well worn paths filled with a thousand patrons. I wanted old earth and a silence that carried nothing. I wanted to scratch the itch that I had carried since youth by way of full submersion in this Alaskan environment.

Cordova wasn't on the main travel circuit. It sat at the edge of Prince William Sound, a town of 2,200 and change, wedged between ocean and mountain, where the salt air mixed with the smell of diesel and fish guts. A real American working town, not a performance. The streets were spare, the buildings had survived many winters, and many hardships, mirroring the faces of its long term residents and as I walked with no real destination, just feeling out the place, locals in pick up trucks offered rides into town from the ferry we all just departed from. Small town hospitality, still a thing up here.

The first night was spent above the only bar in town. A more-than-sufficient dwelling of simple comforts, a safe place to pass out after devouring six halibut tacos and six Alaskan Lagers from the Fish shack down on the harbor. And as the next morning was to be all business, slim in comforts, seeking out adventure, I gave myself a moral pass on such indulgence.

The local library. Small, quiet, walls lined with dog-eared paperbacks and old nautical maps, was where I found my way out. The librarian pointed me toward a man renting out rooms at his house a couple of miles out of town. More importantly, he could point me into the best way to approach such a place of immense size. His place wasn't a hostel or hotel, it was just his home, where he keenly gave the few travelers to the area a room, some pointers, and, to me, his maroon Ford 4Runner, my wheels out into the Chugach National Forest.

With sound advice and supplies for the next five days, I rattled further out of town, the road a mess of gravel and potholes, winding through thick pines and rusting relics and soon enough, the forest opened up to an expansive valley of biblical size. I parked, walked some feet, and looked into a great distance of mountains and glaciers, mud and cold. A distance I had yet to see this far in my life, such an expanse of immense space. And here, among my own self created isolation, I had never felt so very far from home. The space in between so vast I felt it was to be measured in time, not distance.


CHUGACH MOUNTAINS
GRANITE RANGE
ALLEN GLACIER
WERNICKE GLACIER
Mt Hawkins 10395ft 3168m
SCOTT GLACIER
CHILDS GLACIER
Miles Lake
MILES GLACIER
Mt Tom White 11210ft 3417m
CHUGACH NATIONAL FOREST
Cordova
SHERMAN GLACIER
10
BAGLEY ICEFIELD
Mt Steller 10617ft 3236m
Mt Miller
COPPER RIVER DELTA
Martin River
MARTIN RIVER GLACIER
BERING GLACIER
ROBINSON MOUNTAINS
Katalla

I found a place to park up for the night, wedged between dense pines and a glacier pond so clear it looked like cut glass. No RV hookups, no picnic tables, just ground, sky, and a place to build a little fire. I set up my modest camp in the back of the truck: a knockoff sleeping bag, a paper-thin sleep pad, and my jacket rolled up to be a pillow, the essentials. Then, food.

I was given with the truck some reindeer dogs, yep, reindeer hot dogs. “Real unprocessed food” he said “no bullshit”. I skewered one with a long stick and cooked it over the flames, letting the skin blister and char, the scent mixing with woodsmoke. A simple thing, but in that moment, absolute fucking perfection, eaten under a sky that refused to fully darken this time of year in the North. A deep exhale. Just fire, food, and the quiet sounds of life in the woods. I crawled into the back of the 4x4 around 9pm, then, for what seemed an eternity, attempted to sleep, wrapping the sleeping bag around my face to darken the pale light. I drifted for hours but never reached that deep state of preferred sleep, as the night was blue, Alaskan twilight, the kind that never quite fades. Hours passed, tossing and turning, Id listened to about 3 radiohead albums at this point, and as I sat up to move off a seatbelt buckle digging into my hip, with blurred eyes, I sensed movement down the dark gravel road.

In the distance, a figure, dark and unclear. A shot of adrenaline went directly to my corneas. This shadow in the distance, some 50 meters away, was moving slowly but deliberately down the narrow road towards me. Bordered by dark forest, it continued, more movement, deliberate, closer. Too heavy for a deer, too tall for a bear. I tensed as my throat locked up and fear soaked into my very spine.

"Is that a fucking person?"
"Who the fuck is out here at 2 a.m?" – “WALKING?”

This thought, if materialized, would be
a far greater fear than any kind of animal.

I heard it before I clearly saw it as the slow rhythmic crunch on gravel grew closer. The sound had weight, each step measured, unhurried. I held my breath and a can of bear spray, then, through fogged-up windows, I made out a silhouette against the night sky. It was massive, spectral, its brow reaching the heights of surrounding pines and its twisted bone spread wider than the car I cowered in.

"ANTLERS"
"It's a fucking moose."

Its crown mirrored an old oak. Its magnitude & pretense heavy. It kept moving. Closer.
The sheer size of it was paralyzing as it moved like a force of nature, like something ancient that had stepped out of the night to remind me where I was. My pulse hammered in my ears as it reached beside the truck, its legs parallel to the roof, its breath visible in the cool air, nostrils flaring at the scent of a trespasser, a nil concern. A nobody in its presence.

With slow, deliberate steps, it continued past the truck, hooves grinding into the dirt. It disappeared into the tree line, swallowed by the night, leaving only the sound of my thumping heart. I stayed awake long after it had gone, listening to the gentle wind move through the pines, the water, barely audible, rolling over distant stone. This was what I'd come for. These were the experiences desired since youth, unpolished and unsentimental.

A humbling lesson that I was so very, very, VERY small within the fabric of our natural world.

(Day 1 of 6)

A 24 HOUR RESET:

The last voice I heard came from the woman behind the counter of a small café in Palmer, Alaska. Smiles as she handed me a takeaway coffee. No rush. There was apple pie in the display window, golden crust, shining under heat lamps like sunlight on water. I didn't indulge. I'd already loaded the boot with food, eyed the map, and pointed the rental car east. Aiming for quiet. Just a reset before I let the next 6 weeks in Alaska begin. By 10am I'd parked at the end of a long gravel road where the land opens wide beside the Matanuska River. I stepped out, and heard it, silence -except natures soundtrack. No contact. No plans. Just a tent, some supplies, and a full day to allow myself to be nowhere else. To not rush the experience.

The forest was still. Pines rose straight and tall, dark green and unmoving, their trunks spaced wide enough to weave through. I walked slowly, not with purpose, but with attention. Each step softened by the thick floor of needles. I paused often. The smell was deep, earth, resin, cold air. Birds occasionally shifted somewhere up high, but mostly it was still. Down by the river, the water ran clear and fast. Clear like glass. You could see the rocks beneath, smoothed by time, with yellow leaves caught swirling in the current. I crouched at the edge and dipped a hand in. It was glacier-fed, icy enough to steal your breath. Later, I waded in, waist-deep. The cold was instant. Sharp. But on the other side of it: clarity. It rushes through you, wiping your mind clean. No thoughts. Just sensation.

I spent the day like that. Walking, stopping, listening. Sitting on fallen logs like some old man. Watching shadows shift. Letting time stretch. The mountains loomed quietly in the distance, their presence ever constant. You just notice them, again and again, and feel yourself settle. When the light began to fade, I circled stones and built a small fire. Flames warming, flickering against the cooling air. Baked beans on toast with a helping of butter, but it tasted like WAY more, as food cooked over flame awakens something ancestral in us all. In company of the natural world, I warmed my hands by fire, and watched as the last light faded behind the glacier. You don't need Alaska. You just need a pause. A patch of forest. A river. An open fire. One day to be reminded of how nature heals us all.

Sheriton Mountain, ALASKA:

The wind screams and shouts. Each breath feels like ice to the lungs. Stiff fingers clutch the pack straps for reassurance, but they are numb, frozen into their curled grip. They take effort to straighten, so you leave them as they are, clenched. The cold is not just a presence, it's everything, leeching the warmth from your body, from your thoughts, until all that remains is the singular awareness of it. Even your teeth ache, sharpened by the frozen air drawn through them. The wind is relentless, a cruel companion as you begin your ascent up Mount Sheridan in the pale grey of dawn. The morning is quiet, no people, no noise, except for the crunch of boots on frost laced dirt and the occasional snap of twigs underfoot. The world is still in the blue hour, that eerie moment before sunrise when everything feels untethered, caught between night and day.

At 6 a.m the forest is a cathedral of shadows. Trees tower, their canopies still thick enough to filter out the light, making the world feel dreamlike. Pines sway against the dim, their voices creaking. Somewhere unseen, water rushes over stone, carving paths from summit to ocean. But the forest is deceptive. It lures you in with its beauty, its life, only to betray you as you climb higher. The temperature drops, the trail, once forgiving and cushioned by soil and moss, becomes hard. Patches of grass give way to loose stone and jagged rock. Your boots, steady below the tree line, now cautions in unpredictably.

The wind, once a whisper, is now a roar. Above the tree line, it dominates, howling through crevices, almost rattling stones loose, tearing at your layers with an insatiable hunger. It is the voice of the mountains, and its somewhere humans do not flourish. A sense of unease prickles at the back of your neck as you scan the landscape. You are not alone. Perhaps it is the wind playing tricks on your senses, the creaking of a branch, the skitter of unseen creatures in the periphery of your vision. Or perhaps, something watches. Movement between the trees, you pause, you stare, you press on. Then, as if gifted, the mountain opens up before you. The valley sprawls below in an expanse so staggering it seems impossible to have been hidden mere moments before. Fatigue is forgotten and replaced by awe.

The Sheridan Glacier stretches into eternity, a river of ice cutting through the valley. Jagged peaks rise on all sides, monolithic, indifferent. The sky, vast and impossibly high, presses down upon the world. It is here, at the edge of it, that you understand what it means to be small. To be fleeting. To be human in a land that has never needed you, will never remember you. For now, the weather allows my company. You stand at its peak, you breathe it in, knowing that the descent will come soon enough.
Its offerings, its challenges, its reminders, when you need it most, will always be out here.

(Day 2 of 6)

Into The Pines:

Alaska was a dream for years. And it didn't disappoint. I flew into Anchorage. Spent one night in Midtown. Not the dodgiest area, but a little rough to be honest. Anchorage, at times, can be a wild city.

First morning, back to the airport to pick up the rental car. Then. Driving, I can't remember how many hours, Southwest onto the massive Kenai Peninsula. Blanketed in pine forest and snow capped peaks. It amazing. But wet. Very wet. And driving Moose Pass is one of my top 3 most beautiful roads trips ever done. The first night I went all the way down to the small fishing town of Seward. The next morning I was to do the hike up to the Harding Icefield so I camped at the edge of the town next to the Harding glacier-fed river. The campsite was all deep green pine trees with grey gravel stoens and pine needles. Absolutly Beautiful.

WARNING
BEARS IN THE AREA
FOOD STORAGE LOCKER
Please store all food, beverages, coolers and grills when not in immediate use.
NO TRASH ALLOWED
Keep our wildlife safe!
Forest Service

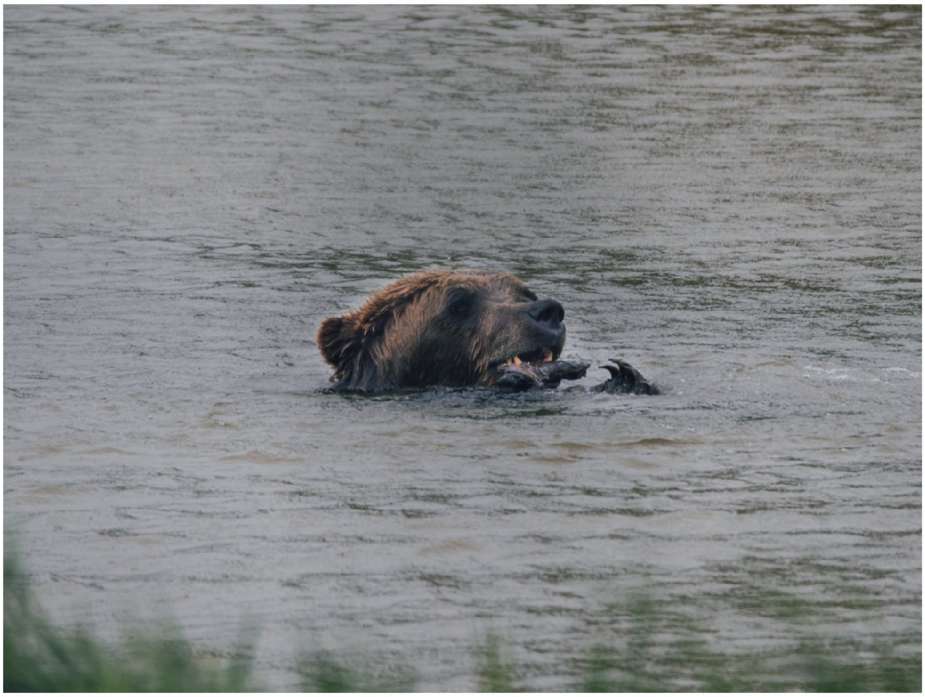
This was only my second night in Alaska and there was a bear box at the entry. I thought there may be black bears around, as the town was nearby, trash cans and all, but I thought grizzlies? Nah... Until the next morning.

As I awoke from the safe protection of a single-person tent parked next to a Toyota Camry, I walked around 50 meters through the beautiful pines to the river, to potentially jump in, or at least dunk my head in its glacial waters to awake.

But as I came over to the bank, I froze. From the splashes in the water - a grizzly.

I imagined it already knew I was there, but it was too busy to bother with me, chewing away un-phased on something that once resembled a life form. I had a 75mm lens on the camera. *Enough zoom to quickly take this picture without consequence.*

That $60 can of bear spray I avoided buying in Anchorage to stretch my budget was purchased the next day at a petrol station for double the price.



COPPER RIVER:

Bear spray. An essential tool in Alaska. Google bear attack images if you want some idea of how these beasts turn a human into a hamburger. This little red canister is a necessary safeguard. A line of defense between you and a very irritable, very large, possibly 350kg grizzly who would rather see you as lunch than as a fellow admirer of nature. So, on my third day in the Chugash region, I decided it was time for a test run. Just to make sure I knew how to use it. You know, in case. I gave the can a good shake, pointed it forward, and pressed the trigger.

A powerful yellow cloud erupted like a volcanic explosion. A hellish mist of weaponized capsicum, designed to deter the most determined of predators. It hung in the air, shimmering in the light. I waited for around 30 seconds for it to clear the area, and then, because I like to think Im an adventurous idiot, I walked directly into where I sprayed the mist of pain.

The effect was immediate. A searing, blinding firestorm engulfed my face. My eyes slammed shut like iron vault doors, my throat constricted as if I had swallowed a ghost pepper the size of a watermelon, and my lips, for god knows why, burned with the fury of a thousand vindaloo's. I staggered back, "too much, too much" I thought, while a hundred coughs and fucks projected from my face hole and my nose expelled a torrent of claggy fluid.

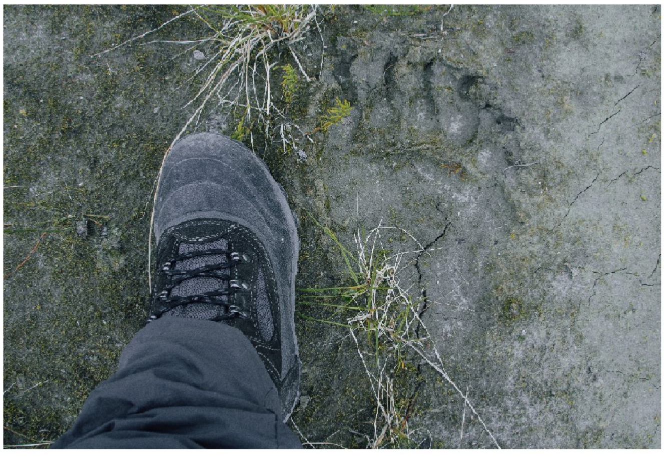
Somewhere in the recesses of my inflamed mind, I realized I had two options: endure the full duration of my self created suffering or get into the frigid river like a man possessed. Given that my face currently felt like the inside of an oven and my eyes where completely locked shut, I stumbled, toward the water, and with the grace of a desperate walrus, I flung myself into the river, plunging into water so cold the regret was also instant. Again.

The burn of the pepper spray was momentarily forgotten as every nerve in my body screamed in protest to the icy waters. It not just cold, it burns. but at least I could see again. Through tear-streaked eyes, I blinked up at the sky, water rushing around me. A fool of a man who was thought to have some intelligence. As I hobbled onto the bank, dripping, shivering, and thoroughly humbled, next time, I thought, I would trust that the spray just worked.

BEAR COUNTRY:
October 2001 a hunter killed an Alaskan Grizzly that was just over 1,500 pounds. It stood 10ft 6in high at the shoulder, 12ft to the top of his head. It's the largest grizzly bear ever recorded in the world.

The Alaska Fish and Wildlife Commission had the bear stuffed, mounted and placed on display at the Anchorage airport to remind tourist's of the risks involved when in the wild.

Based on the contents of the bears stomach, the Wildlife Commission established the bear had killed at least two humans in in its last 72 hours.



Pictured: My size 11 hiking boot next to a Grizzly imprint on the banks of the Copper River.

"I have no doubt that I did some permanant damage to my body during my time in Alaska.
Not in some epic, story-worthy way. Just the kind that sneaks up on you as the years go by.
A joint that's used up its fair share of cartilage, a knee that cracks like a bag of peanuts, tendons that dont
extent the way they use to. Nothing snapped or shattered, just used, maybe overused.

But that's the deal we make, isn't it?
You trade a bit of your future comfort for the chance to feel something in the present"

BUMP IN THE NIGHT:

Fiordland, New Zealand. No snow on the valley floor yet, but the cold is ever present, a breath at your neck, a weight in your boots, a slow seep into the seams of your sleeping bag. This ancient beech forest has seen more winters than humans, and it carries that in moss hanging thick on branches. In a billion leaves coating the forest floor.

The tent is up. A flimsy dome of nylon and hope. Thin walls between you and whatever lives in the dark. You lie still. Listening. Not for the wind or the rain. But for the footstep. The snap of a branch. The breath that doesn't belong to you. The forest, in daylight, is cathedral-like. But by night, it's something else. Beautiful, yes. But indifferent.

A falling leaf can sound like a footstep. A creaking trunk might be a whisper. Your mind fills in the blanks, because it's wired to survive. Not to relax. Headphones? You consider them. Music would be comfort. But also blindness. What if something was out there? Something real. Not monsters, not myths, just the possibility of someone. A human with no tent. No pack. Just reasons. Bad ones. That's what haunts you, not what's imagined, but what could be. And the fact you wouldn't hear it coming.

So you lie there. Awake. Alert. A part of the forest now, but never quite belonging. It's not fear of death exactly. Just the awareness of how easily things can disappear out here.

A Quiet Place:
Angkor Wat, Cambodia

I got there two hours before the gates were meant to open. Pedaled in alone on a mountain bike. The road was empty apart from the occasional scooter buzzing by, hauling boxes of fruit or car parts.

A single security guard stood by the gate. He didn't say much, just gave me a once-over and leaned back in his chair like this wasn't the millionth time someone tried to beat the crowds. I parked the bike and sat on the curb, waiting. No one else around. Just the sound of cicadas waking up and the sun beginning to stretch into the sky.

An hour passed. Then, a young woman showed up and slid into the ticket booth. The guard got up, walked over, nodded toward me, and said something in Khmer. She looked at me, then back at him. Face screwed up in annoyance. A quiet moment passed between them, then she printed out a ticket.

He waved me over. No words needed. Just a few folded dollars passed through the slot, enough for the ticket, and enough for me to say "here for lunch". An unspoken agreement. Baht, dollars, pounds, it doesn't matter. Money opens gates.

I slipped inside alone, long before the day officially began. No tour groups. No cameras clicking. No shouting guides. Just the vast stone sprawl of Angkor Wat with the rising sun stretching shadows across centuries of carved stone.

A Jungle Homestead:

SUMATRA / INDONESIA:

The dream of a jungle bungalow. No sign, no online booking, just a name and a direction. The only way there was to get to Bukit Lawang, cross the river, and keep walking until the trail ended.

Medan was the entry point. One night in the city was enough. Loud, hot, fast. Motorbikes swarmed like flies, concrete boxed in the heat, and the 4 a.m call to prayer came in sharp through a crackling speaker. I ate dinner at the local market, surrounded by curious stares. Good food, but you don't exactly relax with a hundred people watching you chew. My fault, probally shouldnt have worn a singlet. I left early the next morning, motorbike taxi at sunrise to a roadside bus stop, a 4hr wait, another two call to prayers, then away.

The ride took three legs: a long-distance bus with busted air-con, a smaller van with too many knees and not enough suspension, and finally the back of a scooter, holding my bag tight as we rattled through potholes. I didn't see another foreigner the whole way. Bukit Lawang wasn't exactly off the map, but it hadn't been smoothed out for comfort either.

It straddles the edge of the jungle, but the line between town and forest is messy. Age-old trees draped in vines reach down into streams that run under houses and market stalls. Palm fronds lean into footpaths. Creepers wrap themselves around anything not moving. Tin rooftops peek through the canopy. It's not a place built beside the jungle, it's a place half-swallowed by it.

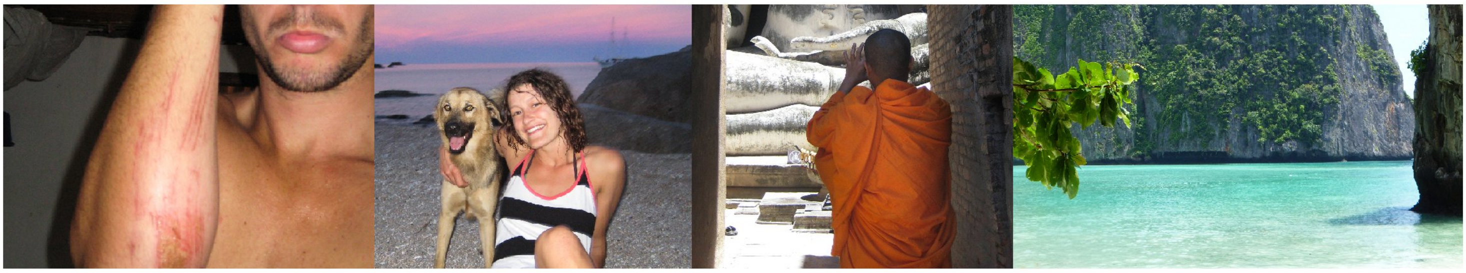
From town, I kept walking. A thin trail slipping into rainforest that wraps around you. Thick undergrowth, roots like ropes, humidity that clings and a few locals passing in the opposite direction, moving fast, sure-footed.

It took about two hours before the sound of water got louder. Then the trees opened up to a river. There was no bridge, just a wooden cart hanging from a cable, with a pulley system to get across. Simple setup. You pulled yourself hand over hand. It wasn't dangerous, but you didn't want to fall in either. The river moved fast enough to matter.

A few more minutes on foot and the trail opened into a small clearing. Two timber bungalows beside a low-built house, a vegetable garden overflowing with greens, and chickens scratching in the dirt. The Dutch couple who lived there, mid to late fifties, waved me in. They were making damper over a coal fire, which, as an Australian, felt like a personalized welcome. We wandered the homestead. They showed me how they'd rigged a system for drinking water, simple, smart, and clean. Eggs were in constant supply. Every meal was heavy with green: mint, lettuce, coriander, spinach, all from the garden. It was basic living, but nothing felt like a compromise.

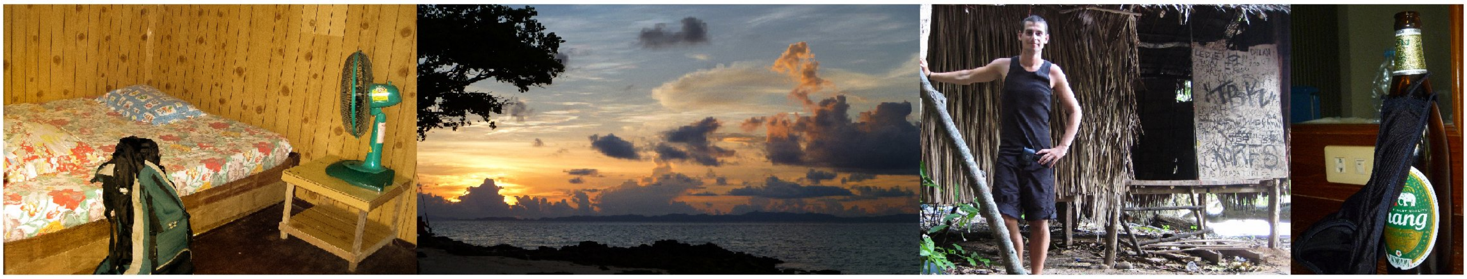
I'd come partly in the hope of seeing orangutans. This jungle's one of the last places they still live in the wild. I didn't see a single one. But it didn't matter. What stayed with me wasn't wildlife or scenery, it was the quiet, steady way this couple had chosen to live. No noise, no performance. Just calm, health, and enough of everything.

There are a million ways to live a life.
This was one of them.



Kill Time

vonzipper
reefpro


Chang

ซุ้มไก่ไชยพิชิต
FIGHTING COCK CAMP
A WORLD THAI HERITAGE

Thailand 2008 *(already a decade too late)*

Back when the world felt a little less boxed in and the Internet lived in dimly lit cafés, Thailand felt like a vestige of backpacker freedom. Before influencer hotspots and Insta-friendly beach clubs, we moved through the country like the undocumented, no Google Maps, no TripAdvisor, just whispers of places passed between travelers over Chang beers and fire shows. It was cheap, it was dirty, it was unhinged if you wanted it to be, and it was glorious.

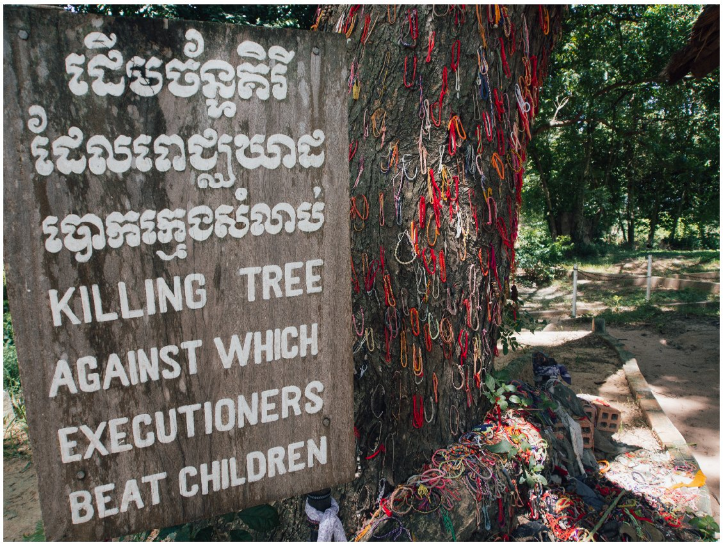
The nights bled into mornings. Numerous times. We crashed scooters on unlit roads, our knees and elbows tattooed with gravel rash. We slept in huts where the walls were thinner than paper, the fans barely strong enough to push the thick night air around. Some mornings, we woke tangled in sweaty sheets, faces imprinted in memory like exhaust burns. The 24-hour romances burned fast and bright, leaving nothing but sun-kissed skin and a vague promise to meet again sometime, somewhere, someday. There was no swiping right, no ghosting, only real words, real glances, real rejections. We met people in bars, in hammocks, on the overnight train where our backpacks doubled as pillows. The full moon parties turned into hazy fever dreams, sand sticking to sunburned skin as we danced under neon lights, buckets of alcohol making gods of the most unremarkable among us. A fire dancer spun a flaming circle around his body, and we cheered as though we had just witnessed magic.

Hangovers didn't matter. They were cured by banana pancakes and the saltwater shock of a morning swim. The ocean here didn't just cleanse, it baptized, washing away hangovers committed in the name of hedonism. We'd snorkel until our backs turned lobster-red, then dive deeper, down where the world was blue and silent. The sea held none of the chase we had above water, only serenity, only silence. In a bar with no walls and a floor of sand, a German girl bet me a rum that I couldn't climb a coconut tree. Drunken bravado took hold, I scaled the thing only a few pathetic meters before gravity, my upper body weakness and my own stupidity won. I spent the next day nursing my foot of shaved skin in a hammock, listening to the waves, sipping from a beer I had no business drinking so early in the day. A faint scar today, my trophy from that night.

Somewhere in the haze of that trip, a temple stood at the top of a crumbling staircase, half-swallowed by the jungle. A lone monk in orange robes moved silently through the ruins. We knelt on the cool stone floor, the scent of incense curling through the air, and for a brief moment, the world slowed. Then, just as quickly, it sped up again, propelling us toward another day of the unknown. But it wasn't just the chaos that made it unforgettable, it was the people. The street vendors knew our faces after just a day, smiling as we returned for another round of steamed rice and satay skewers, or another plate of som tam, its fiery chili burning away last night's bad decisions. The noodle carts that lined the streets at all hours, their woks hissing, the scent of garlic and fish sauce thick in the humid air. Pad kra pao, rich with holy basil and chilies, devoured on plastic stools under flickering fluorescent lights. Fresh coconut hacked open with a machete, handed over with a straw, condensation running down the sides like cold sweat in the heat.

The island itself was a masterpiece. Mornings were slow and golden, the light catching on the limestone cliffs that jutted from the sea like the spines of ancient creatures. The beaches were ribbons of white, the water impossibly clear, shifting from turquoise to deep blue as the coral reefs dropped off into darkness. We spent hours floating above the reefs, the world below us alive with movement, parrotfish darting between anemones, moray eels peering from rocky crevices, the occasional sea turtle gliding by, ancient and unbothered by time. It was a world untouched by the madness of our own, a reminder that there was still something pure left in the world. Just the sound of water lapping against the hull, the distant cry of a sea eagle.

The days were measured in beers and sunsets, the nights in lost hours and gained experiences. Our feet were always dirty, our shoulders always damp with sweat. There was no checking the time, no checking our appearance.
We were all allowed to be feral, but free, untethered to anything but the moment.



The Killing Fields, CAMBODIA *"The Soil Remembers"*

There's no entry fee that prepares you. No sign that softens it. Just a tree and a deep silence bought on by reflection of what happened where you stand. You hear of stories, executioners, drunk on rice wine, using children like tools of terror. The bracelets tied to the bark representing lives ended in the most barbaric of ways. Cambodia and its people don't want your pity. Just your witness in order to never repeat the past.

Medan, INDONESIA *"Coffee & Clove Smoke"*

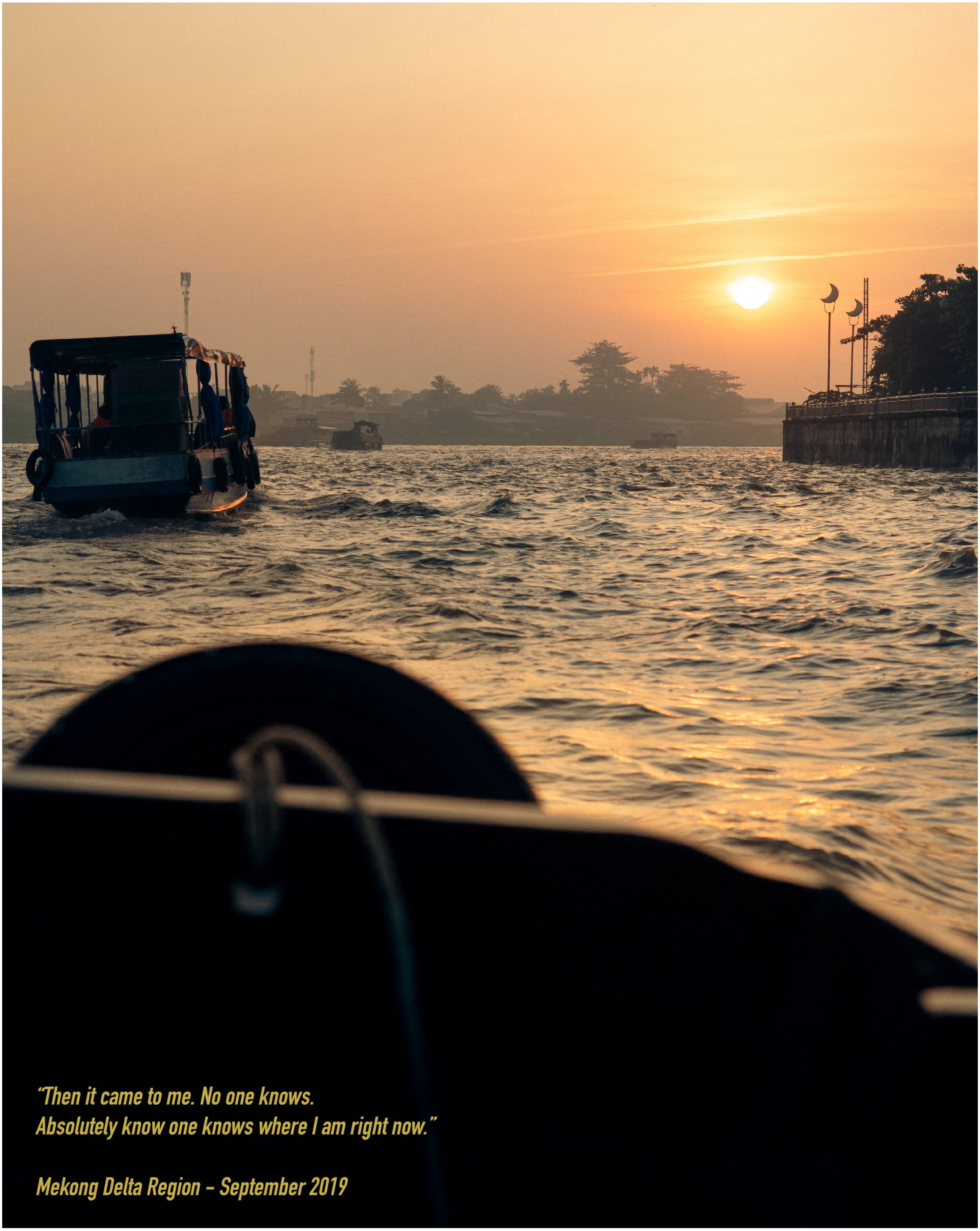
There are no tourists in Medan. Just smoke, sweat, and endless traffic. And coffee, sweet, thick as oil, served with a stare and a cigarette. You sat on a stool the size of a lunchbox. But for a few minutes, the city slowed down. The sugar hit. The caffeine punched. You almost felt local. Almost. Then the rain came. It always does. Poncho's out and helmets on as you ride off to another street, to another interaction.

Outside Valdez, ALASKA *"A Deep Exhale"*

4th of July. Every campground was full. I had no booking or idea that I should have booked. Where to park up for the night in my rental was the question. But in Alaska, every turn off, every tarmac that turns to gravel, every path, overgrown and bumpy leads to its beautiful expansive wilderness. And more importantly, somewhere to light a campfire, sink a six pack of Budweiser, cook campfire nachos and sit back in gratefulness. *This is all Ill ever need to regain my happiness.*

Sapa, VIETNAM *"Red Meat, Beautiful Eyes"*

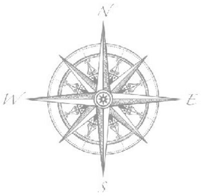
She slapped the meat like it owed her money. The market stank of blood, mud, fresh cut herbs and diesel. Some tourists, as myself, took photos, as this is a world apart from how we do things back home. She wore crocs and counted change like a dealer. You asked how much for the ribs out of curiosity and seeking some interaction. She looked back as if to say *"What in the hell are you going to do with ribs?"*

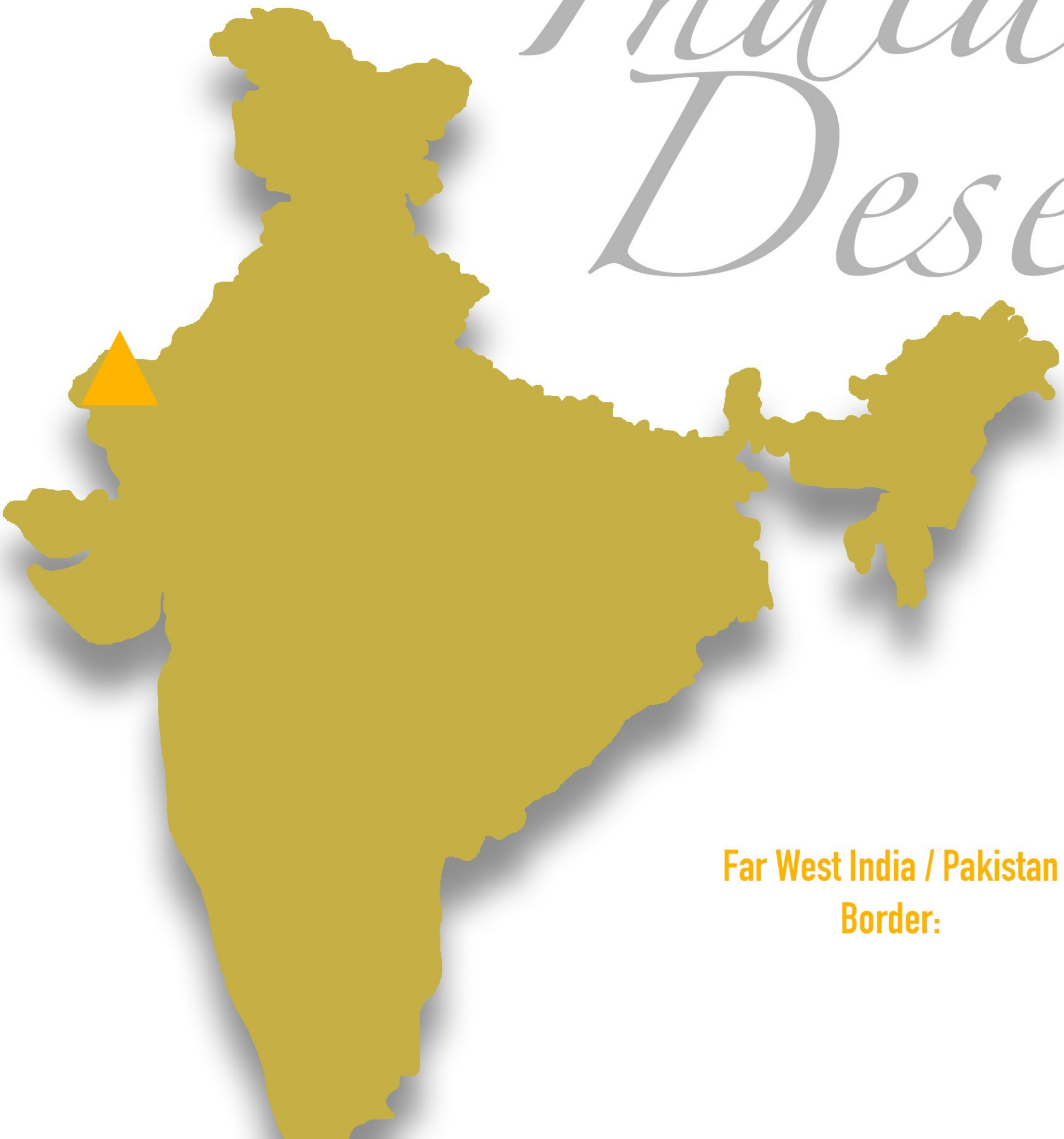


“Then it came to me. No one knows.
Absolutely know one knows where I am right now.”

Mekong Delta Region – September 2019

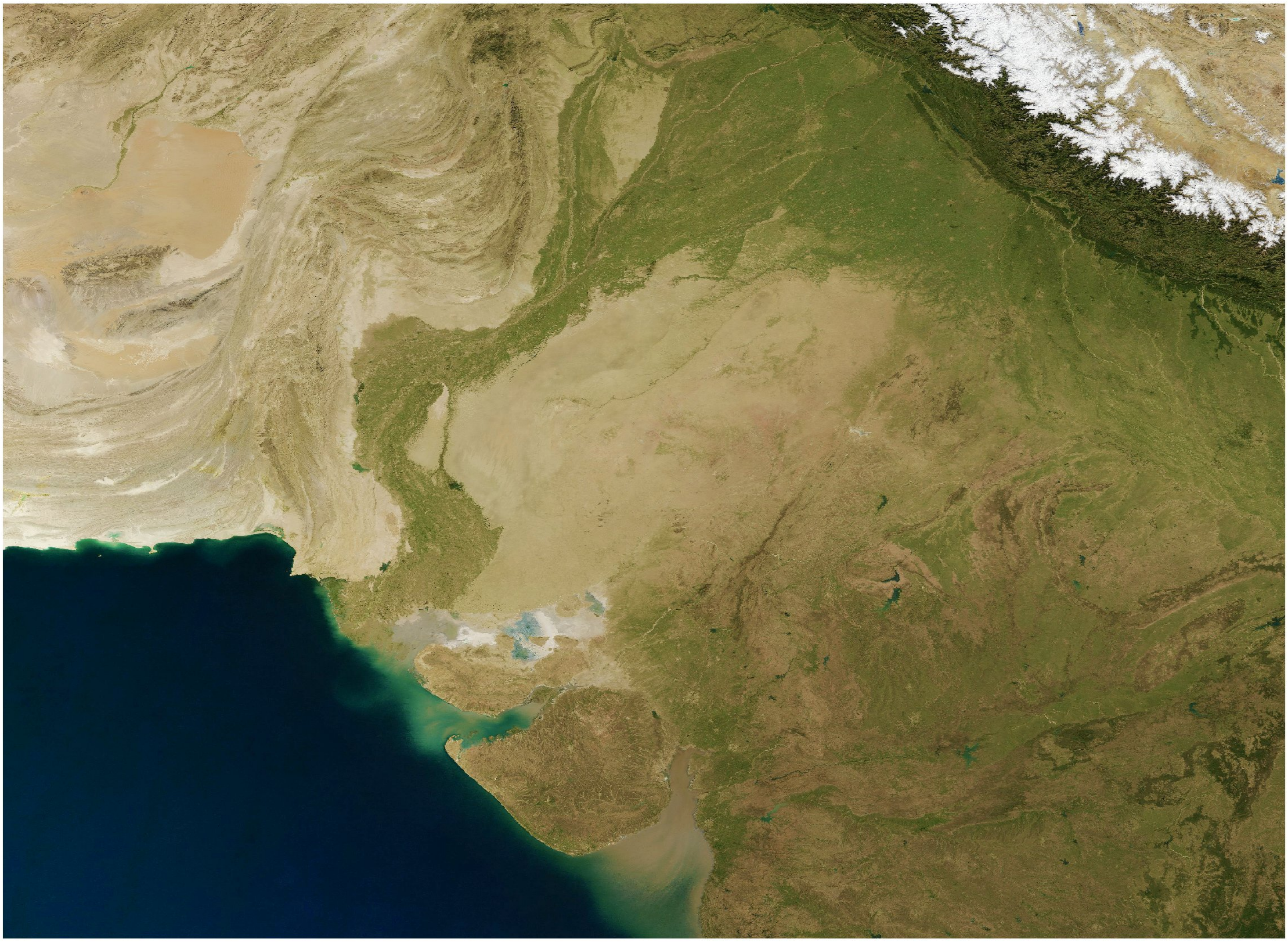
The Great Indian Desert





Far West India / Pakistan Border:

Thar Desert (India)



27.0000° N – 71.0000° E

“रेगिस्तान में भी फूल खिलते हैं।”

“Registan mein bhi phool khilte hain”

"Even in the desert, flowers bloom"

A Hindi proverb signifying hope and resilience in harsh conditions.

A Great Nothingness:

Men have tried. They drew maps. Built walls. Staked flags in the dunes and told stories of what belonged to whom. Still, they came, on foot, on camel, behind wheels. From Persia and Punjab, from Delhi and Europe. But the desert teaches quickly. Every empire, every caravan, every god-whispered claim, buried in the same humility.

Out here, you begin to understand why people believed in gods of wind, stone and fire.

The bus clattered into Jaisalmer beneath the pavement melting sun of early afternoon, the sandstone buildings making up the dusty outpost that rises out of the desert. Golden walls weathered by centuries, standing strong against the relentless stretch of sand that surrounds them. The Thar Desert looms beyond, two hundred thousand square kilometers of dust, stone, heat and quiet.

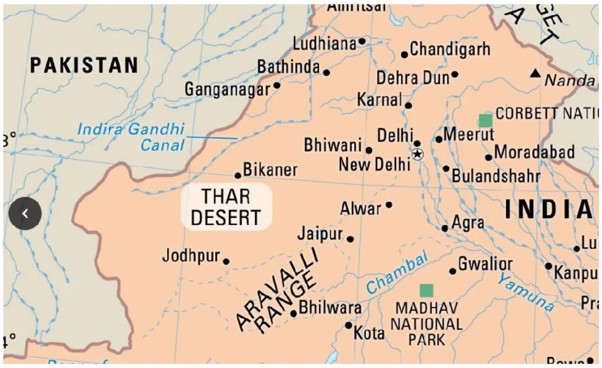
I'd come here to experience the great nothingness. Not for a quick jaunt, a night or two on the dunes with bottled water and cold beer, but something further out, past the reach of day trips, where the desert was everything and left only the echo of its sands over dunes. I wanted to disappear. Just for a little while.

I was staying at a small guesthouse tucked into the honeycomb streets of the old city, I explained to the owner what I was looking for, as surely I wasn't the only traveler who dreamed for the experience and isolation of quiet dunes. He found someone willing to take me. A man named Rafiq, with sun-bitten skin and a grin that cut through the language barrier. He'd done these trips countless times. There was he, three camels and me. No real set route. No promise of comfort or fun, just six nights through the sands, riding towards the Pakistan border where the desert blurred into another country.

The guesthouse owner drove me out of the city, an hour along a crumbling gravel road into the heat. Nothing but dry earth and shifting dunes. The occasional scrub. He left me on the side of the road without much of a goodbye. Then the dust settled, and I was alone bar a few wandering goats and herders. Another man came down the road in a sedan of all cars and yelled out "You... Rafiq." I gave the thumbs up and jumped in. Another 45 minutes till we reached a village of around 100 inhabitants. We pulled up to a simple clay home with a fence built of weaved sticks that within, the camels sat grunting, maybe already aware of the long days ahead.

We set off the next morning before dawn, slow, deliberate movements through the early light. The first few hours passed in silence, save for the soft groan of the camels and the crunch of sand under their padded feet. He was quiet, either by my disruption to his next few days or by respect. By mid-morning, the sun laid its weight across the land, and the desert began to open up, not as an empty space, but as something alive in its own strange rhythm. A world stripped bare. No trees to break the horizon, no shade to cling to, only the dunes shifting in slow motion.

We traveled like this for days. Four hours riding in the morning, four in the evening. The middle of the day was a furnace, reaching a blistering 45 degrees. We found what shade we could beneath thorny shrubs, laying out blankets and drinking tea as the heat hummed across the sand. Rafiq barely touched his water. I drank mine like a camel. He thought that was funny and laughed about it often.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Delhi
Meerut
Moradabad
New Delhi
Bulandshahr
Bikaner
THAR DESERT
Alwar
INDIA
Agra
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MADHAV NATIONAL PARK
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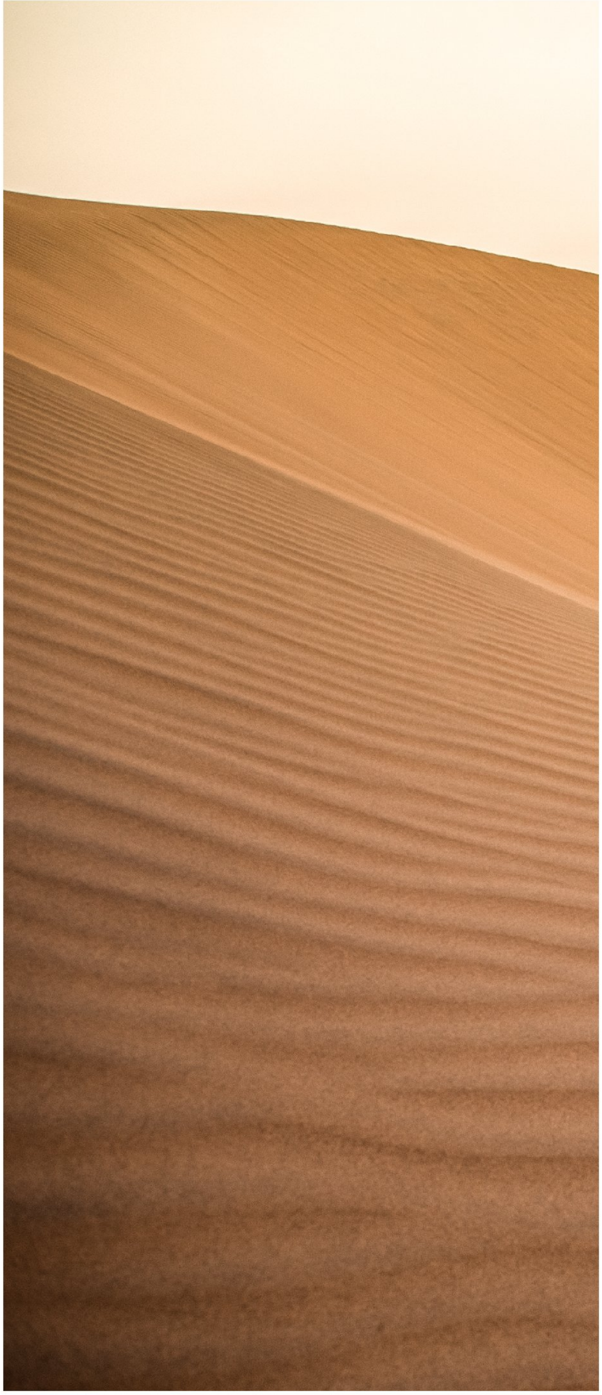


The first village we passed was little more than a handful of mud huts half-sunk into the dunes. Eight or nine kids appeared from nowhere, throwing stones at us with wicked grins. Rafiq picked up a few rocks and tossed them back, a playful exchange that seemed part of the landscape out here. I stayed out of it, unsure of the rules. The kids scattered when they got bored, disappearing back into the huts.

Another day, another village. This one with maybe fifty people, half of them waiting in the shade for something to entertain while the other half went about the business of survival. Homes here stood on earth and ingenuity, not concrete or steel. Wealth wasn't measured in paper notes but in water and livestock, things you could touch, things that kept you alive. Strangers were met with handshakes, plates were shared, and what little they had was offered freely. There was a kindness in the simplicity of life reduced to its purest form.

We bought a chicken from a woman wrapped in bright red fabric. That night we (Rafiq) killed and cooked it beneath a lone acacia tree, the first solid meal of meat in days. As many here are vegetarian. The desert dogs lingered close, thin and wild-eyed, hoping for scraps. Some follow us for miles, wandering out from the villages to scavenge or maybe just to see what lay beyond. The doggos on their own journey of survival.

On the third day, we passed through the bones of an abandoned village, just cracked walls and crumbling clay foundations left behind by lives long forgotten. The isolation there felt thicker, heavier. I walked among the ruins while the camels rested, trying to picture what once stood here. How generations lived here, eventually swallowed by the desert, leaving only dust and half-remembered stories.

On the fourth evening, just before the sun dipped low, we stumbled upon a desert well. A simple stone circle half-buried in the sand. Rafiq's face lit up as if he'd found an old friend. He tied a frayed rope around a bucket and sent it clattering down into the darkness. The water came up cool and clear. We drank in long, grateful pulls. He told me these wells were lifelines scattered across the Thar, some dug centuries ago into underground springs. I'd never tasted anything sweeter. It reminded me how easy it is to forget what a gift water is when you live in places where taps always flow.

At this village above, Rafiq clearly had friends. They greeted him with handshakes, coffee, and biscuits, content to sit and talk on the steps while I wandered through the huts and homes on my own, taking pictures of this far off lifestyle. I doubted I was the first tourist to pass through. But instead of handshakes, I got laughter, like I had something stuck to my back, some sign I couldn't read. Later, Rafiq told me, "They laughed because… you look *so* different." Zero bother to me. Happy to be the joke, if it buys someone a laugh. I suppose wokeness was yet to reach this outpost.

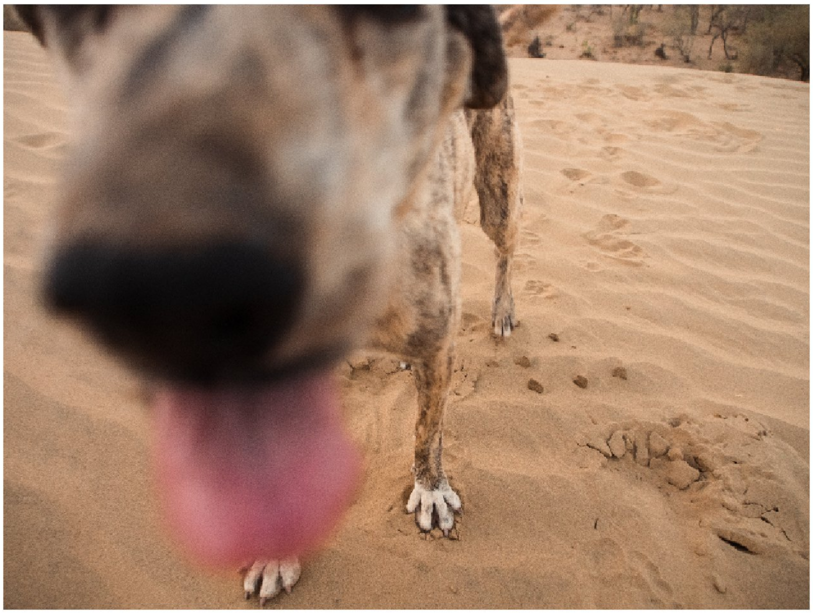
That night, the desert bloomed after dark. The moon rose full and pale, and the dunes came alive with the sound of beetles and cicadas clicking through the sand. Rafiq played a small wooden flute by the fire, a slow, haunting tune that seemed to echo out over the sands. I watched the embers glow while scooping up seasoned basamati with naan bread and thought about absolutely nothing but the current vision before me.

On the fifth day, a storm came crawling out of the horizon, dark clouds rolling in the distance. I could deal with all the discomfort thrown my way, but rain, as hot as it was, I was not keen for. “No rain” Rafiq said “sand”. As he gestured with his foot, kick up some sand. The wind picked up, first whispering through the dunes, then howling as the sands began to lift. We huddled beneath blankets while the sand storm, only a minor one, painted the world around us, a swirling chaos of dust and heat. It passed as quickly as it arrived, leaving the land a little reshaped, the dunes shifted into new forms. It was as if the desert had rewritten itself, erasing our footsteps and plastic bottles that, even out here, scattered the land.

The wind turbines rose on the horizon, spindly white giants spinning slow above the sands. They marked the edge of the border, where the desert dissolved into Pakistan. It was a strange sight after days of nothing but earth and sky, something man-made pushing against the natural elements. There not out here for “green energy”, there out here for necessity.

I didn’t know what I'd come looking for out here. Maybe just space, something vast enough to make me feel small after the last few weeks of India's chaotic crush. Maybe it was the need to strip everything back to its barest elements. A reset. Water. Fire. Stars. Maybe I didn't need a reason at all, except to fill an adventurous fantasy that itched when in comfort.

By the sixth day, I felt ready for this jaunt to close out, the endless dust, the heat that made your bones ache, the same sun rising and falling over the same endless stretch of nothing. Although, there was a little sadness in its ending. I gave Rafiq the agreed rupees, *"enough"* he said to help towards buying another camel. Then the same sedan from the same village carried me back along the dirt road towards Jaisalmer, stopping to pick up desert dwellers heading into town to stock up on essentials. They stared at me, thin, unshaven, sun-darkened, wrapped in dust. And once again, smiles at my expense were welcomed.



"Dogs. No creature follows farther or loves harder"

Back at the guesthouse within the walls of the old fort, I stood beneath the cool shower, watching a week's worth of sand and dirt spiral down the drain as the sun, warm and golden, sank behind the city. I looked out over the ancient stones and felt a strange mix of gratitude and disbelief:

How lucky I was for my life. To only visit, by choise, such harsh places, rather than cut out a life amoungst them.

I could have stayed the night and digested the last few days, yet, I felt the pull to continue moving, so I boarded an overnight bus South bound for Udaipur. 10 Hours on a sleeper with, *thank christ,* a toilet. The sun faded behind the city as the light slipped away. Another vision of the past dissolved with nothing found, only the quiet release of something no longer meant to stay.

Smoke Trails in Yangon:

In Yangon, the holy places don't advertise themselves. There folded into the chaos like breath into lungs. You won't find them on a map or behind ticket counters. They're down soot-streaked alleys and behind sizzling food stalls, tucked between rusted corrugated tin and rotting colonial bones. And when you step inside, if you're lucky enough to notice them, it's like entering another frequency.

One such place found me when I wasn't looking. A doorway half-swallowed by shadow. No signs, no statues out front. Just a faint scent of incense trailing into the air. Inside, the world slowed. A thin haze drifted through the stillness, catching the muted light in golden strands. The walls were dark wood, their surfaces worn smooth by decades of smoke and worshiping hands. A black lacquered altar stood at the far end, crowned with offerings, bananas, tea cups, candle stubs, and money folded with care. Above it, a faded portrait of an ancestor looked out into the room with a gaze. Around him: curling paper dragons, plastic flowers, ribbons faded by time. It was part shrine, or part memory, an unchanging heart within a city that rarely sits still.

Outside, Yangon roared. Buses groaned, dogs barked, children laughed in bursts, and the air smelled of rain and frying oil. But in here, all of that fell away. The floor was cool. The ceiling low. And the silence, the real, breathing silence, wrapped itself around you like skin. These places aren't built to impress, they're built to endure.

The Grey Abyss in NEW ZEALAND:

The first three days of the Routeburn Track were soaking rain and moss-covered trees, a never-ending wet that got into every compartment of your clothes and pack. No sweeping valleys. No mountain views. Just ancient beech forest, dripping and endless. As endless as the steps you take in the ascent. That afternoon, I was alone. Most hikers had already made it to the huts, spaced about six hours apart. But I had my tent and no deadline, so I pressed on, up past Lake Mackenzie and into the exposed alpine.

As I climbed above the tree line, the world vanished. Thick fog swallowed everything. Visibility dropped to a few feet. Grey in every direction. Not mist. Not haze. Just complete fucking nothingness. I'd waited days to get above the forest, to finally see the drama of the mountains. And now, I couldn't see shit. No peaks. No glaciers. Just a faint rocky path and the sound of my music blaring in my headphones that kept me moving.

What I didn't know, what I couldn't know, was that just a few feet to my right was a sheer drop. A vertical cliff face falling hundreds of feet straight down. I wasn't reckless. I didn't fool around or stray off the trail for a piss. I was a good boy. Careful and calculated as always. I just had no idea what was beside me. It was invisible, tucked inside the fog. It was at least an hour of hugging the steep mountain to my left, so I imagined to my right, the same drop continued.

The next morning, the skies cleared. I met hikers coming from the other direction, cheerful and dry. They told me about the view, the sheer drop that people exited but nervously negotiated. They mentioned how you could see for miles across valleys and snow-dusted peaks.

But I missed it. I missed the view I'd worked so hard for. That's the truth of it. The drop didn't get me. The fog just robbed me blind. Sometimes you're lucky with the weather. Sometimes you're just unaware of how lucky you are.

A Quiet Scream, ALASKA:

Somewhere an hour North of Anchorage. Not the postcard part. Not the moose, the mountains, or the cruise ship smiles. The other Alaska, the one not far down the wrong street of almost every town. The one still thawing from a hundred winters of disappointment.

The house sat slouched on its own frame, barely standing. Its layers peeled back like an open wound, windows punched in (or out) long ago. The kind of place that makes your stomach drop and your nerves stand to attention before your shoes step inside. And when I did, the place hit like a punch. Grime, needles, shattered bottles, condoms and a foam mattress in the middle of the floor, still holding the ghost of someone who mistook it for a place to rest. Spray-painted across the wood beneath it, in thick black letters: METH.

That's it. One word. No poetry, no flair, just the declaration. A warning. Or the surrender of a soul who wanted their suffering to be seen. I stood there a while, taking in the place, just looking at the mattress, the word, the layers of graffiti and rot. And all I could think was: This is what it looks like when people stop being seen. You can feel it at the edge of towns like this. The way the air hangs. People still live nearby, but not in this house. This house is for ghosts and addicts, for stories that no one wants to live out, but someone has to.

The darkness in the world isn't always dramatic. It's not always war or riots or men with guns. Sometimes it's just a quiet house in the middle of nowhere, filled with the smell of piss and burned insulation. Where someone once came to disappear, not from the world, but from the harder thing: Themselves.

I've met them before, people who float through the Red Light Districts of Patong, the hidden beaches of Goa, through places like this, broken-teethed and twitchy. Guys who talk about God one minute and government conspiracies the next. Women who lost the path and plot so long ago they're not even mad anymore. Just existing. Because there's no better breeding ground for hate towards ones-self than when hope itself fails you.

What do people believe in when the system spat them out before they ever stood a chance? And the only community that welcomed them handed them a pipe with a dream. Not dreams of money or fame, but the dream of feeling something. Anything. Even if it burns them alive. The walls of the house were covered in graffiti, names, crude drawings, pentagrams, a few attempts at art.
All of it screaming into the void. *"I was here. I existed. I mattered"* Even if no one was listening.

I took these pictures because the reality of the world is that of darkness and light. And I felt for the souls who slept where I stood, just because they where born on the other side of the fence.

Rusty Pedals & Rice Paddies, VIETNAM:

There were four of us riding old push bikes through the backroads of Ninh Binh, mine groaned with every turn and squealed like a drowning pig on every downhill. The others weren't much better, all rust and rattle. We rode in single file, dodging potholes and puddles, trading smiles with old women and kids on squeaky scooters who raced us for sport.

We passed through landscapes that didn't seem real. Rice paddies glowed in rows of electric green, their edges held in place by crumbling mud walls and narrow footpaths. Farmers in conical hats stood waist-deep in water, scattering feed to ducks or coaxing water buffalo with rope and gentle clicks of the tongue. The air was thick with the scent of water and earth and occasional woodsmoke, drifting lazily from cooking fires somewhere behind banana groves. You don't need much conversation on a ride like that. The crickets and the pedals. The crunch of gravel and the occasional burst of laughter from the Korean girls ahead, still buzzing from each new sight, goats on a roof, a man carrying a tree on his motorbike, an altar built into a telephone pole. They stopped often, taking selfies, laughing at signs, offering countless snacks from their handlebar baskets.

Zhao didn't say much. He rode steady, his expression open but quiet, soaking it all in. I got the sense this trip meant a lot to him. First time abroad. First time out there. He'd asked if I ever got tired of it. The road alone, the movement, the unfamiliar. I'd said no. But the truth is, sometimes I do. You start to see patterns, one country's temple looks like another's shrine, one street market blurs into the next. But riding beside people who are still in awe of it all? That brings it back. Their wonder makes your world shine again. I've spent ALOT of time moving solo. Border to border, town to town. It's a rhythm that suits me, mostly. A gift, sometimes. A burden, other times. Depends on the day. Depends on the place. But on this ride, I embraced the communal joy. We weren't a crew built to last, just four travelers with overlapping paths on that day.

Travel pulls in every type. You meet party-chasers and peace-seekers, gap year first-timers, digital nomads with deadlines, artists painting their way across continents, old blokes with conflict stories, and kids who just saved enough for a flight and a some beers. You meet the ones running from something, and the ones running toward it. Backgrounds blur. Bank accounts don't matter. Status is irrelevant. Where you're from becomes one of the least interesting things about you. What matters is how open you are. How curious. We reached the base of a limestone karst after following a side road that turned to gravel, then to mud. Just a crooked set of steps climbing into the cliffs, watched over by two stone dragons with moss for teeth. The hike was a leg-burner. We climbed in silence, sweat dripping, hearts thudding. At the top, the view hit: Green fields stretching to the edge of vision, rivers like veins running through them, karsts rising like dormant dinosaurs from the floodplains. We didn't say much. We physically couldn't from all the puffing. We just caught our breath and looked with a certain kind of silence that is a understandable language.

On the ride back to Tam Coc, the light turned syrupy and golden, pouring through gaps in the cliffs and catching on every flooded paddy. Insects buzzed and the water shimmered with the breeze. We passed an old man herding ducks with a long stick. A woman selling iced tea waved as we rolled by. The whole flow of this world felt so connected. We got back dusty, sunburned, and smiling. The girls were already planning where to eat. They wanted noodles. Food was there love. Zhao pulled out a cold beer from the reception fridge and perched on a plastic chair out on the pavement. That's the thing about days like this. You don't need perfect weather or a mapped-out itinerary. You just need a little curiosity, and people who remind you that the world still surprises.

At days end, it does not fucking matter, Korean, or Chinese, or Australian. We were just people, looking to feel something a little different, moving together through something we all see as beautiful.

INTERRUPTED PEACE, INDIA: There are few places on earth where the land feels sculpted by gods in a bad mood. Hampi is one of them. Massive boulders stack impossibly on top of one another like Mother Nature threw a tantrum, all scattered across the plains and hills like forgotten pieces of an intended puzzle. It's a place of history, of carved stone temples and sun-bleached ruins where echoes of battles past take rest in the soil. Time paused somewhere between myth and mischief.

That morning, 6AM rise. Camera, cash, scooter & room keys, passport: All into the man satchel. On my scooter, an easy 10 minutes out of town to get a sweet chai tea from a small stall I'd spotted the previous day. The stand was sleepy, just the owner and his gear under some corrugated iron roofing held up by a simple timber frame. For him it was more about the conversation than the currency, but I nodded in thanks to the chai wallah, wrapped my fingers around the warmth, and wandered down alone toward the river.

I liked starting my days there, just me and the boulders, giant and quiet in their ancient watch. Each one a beast, smoothed by centuries of sun and water. A morning that makes you believe, foolishly, that anything is possible within the day that lay ahead. I stepped carefully along the curved stone edges, hopping down toward the water's edge, where the world was calm and the day still undecided.

Then I turned my back for five seconds, maybe less, to simply admire the light from the east and to take a sip of tea.
And when I turned back, my bag was gone.
Vanished:

At first, my brain refused to register where the fuck it went. But then I saw him. The thief. A monkey, about three boulders ahead of me with my bag slung on his wiry arm. Then it registered: This little prick has done this before. In that bag: My passport, my scooter & room key, all my cash (Hampi didn't have an ATM yet), and my beloved camera, which made up a large percentage of why I travel. Basically, my whole fucking life was in that Vietnamese knock-off North Face fanny pack.

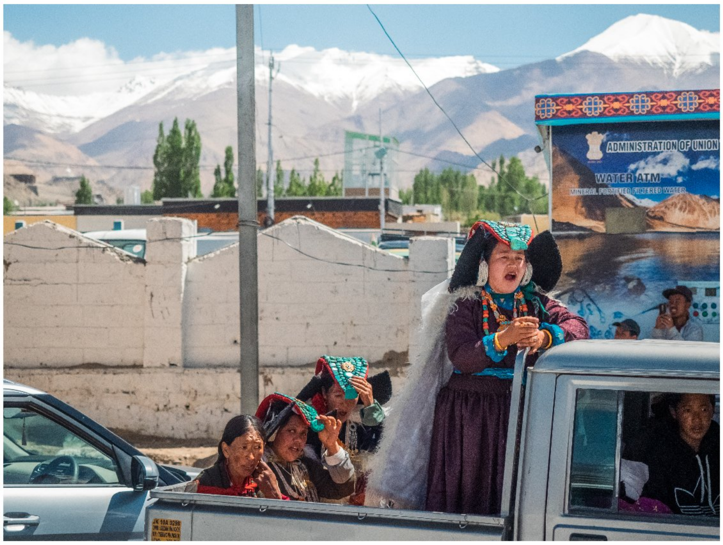
I started after him like a wombat on weed, awkwardly, limbs going in the wrong directions, trying to maintain balance, speed and hope the rock surfaces, not made for panic, hold my feet. The boulders were anywhere from four to eight feet in size with the gaps between, dropping some two to ten feet, into crevices my butter chicken figure could not squeeze between in case the little nut sack decided to drop it. I clawed forward, scrambling one boulder at a time. And the monkey, he kept just ahead, always one rock further, one jump out of reach. The little fucking shit of a thing knew exactly what he was doing. And I say he because if he were human, he'd definitely be a teenager. An eshay, perhaps. The kind that loiters outside a 7-Eleven in trackies, yelling at strangers, disrupting the harmony of the world not for gain, not for need, but simply to watch it burn. A born disruptor. A shit-stirrer by trade.

Boulder by boulder, I followed him, my cup of tea and peace still sitting, fading on that rock where I was to breathe in the new day, not be anxiety-riddled at the thought of this teat-sucking glorified rat dropping my bag into the abyss below, beyond the reach of my hoofs. My things slapped uselessly against rock, just making me even more awkward.
I tried negotiation. I tried reverse psychology. I tried praying to Vishnu.
Nothing fucking worked.

The monkey paused just long enough to look back, eyes glinting with glee, before, casually and without theatre, dropping my bag. He just let go of it on a rock. Uneventfully. I tumbled and thud. Slid a little more. Thud. Hip bone and ass cheek meeting a boulder. My payment for the pursuit. A nice large black bruise to come a few hours later.

Yet. Passport? There.
Money? Still there.
Scooter key? Unbelievably, still in the side pocket.
Camera? Lens cap off but not a scratch.

I sat down right there on the rocks, breathing hard, panic fading, mirroring the warmth of my tea. Above me, the monkey sat back like a smug dictator, gently picking his toes, utterly at peace with himself and the chaos he'd caused. I sipped what was left of my drink, tied my bag around my arm, firmly, laughed at the sight of myself, and looked around. The boulders still stood. The river still flowed. The sun continued to rise. The world kept moving forward as it does while a quiet war played out, unnoticed by all except for its participants.

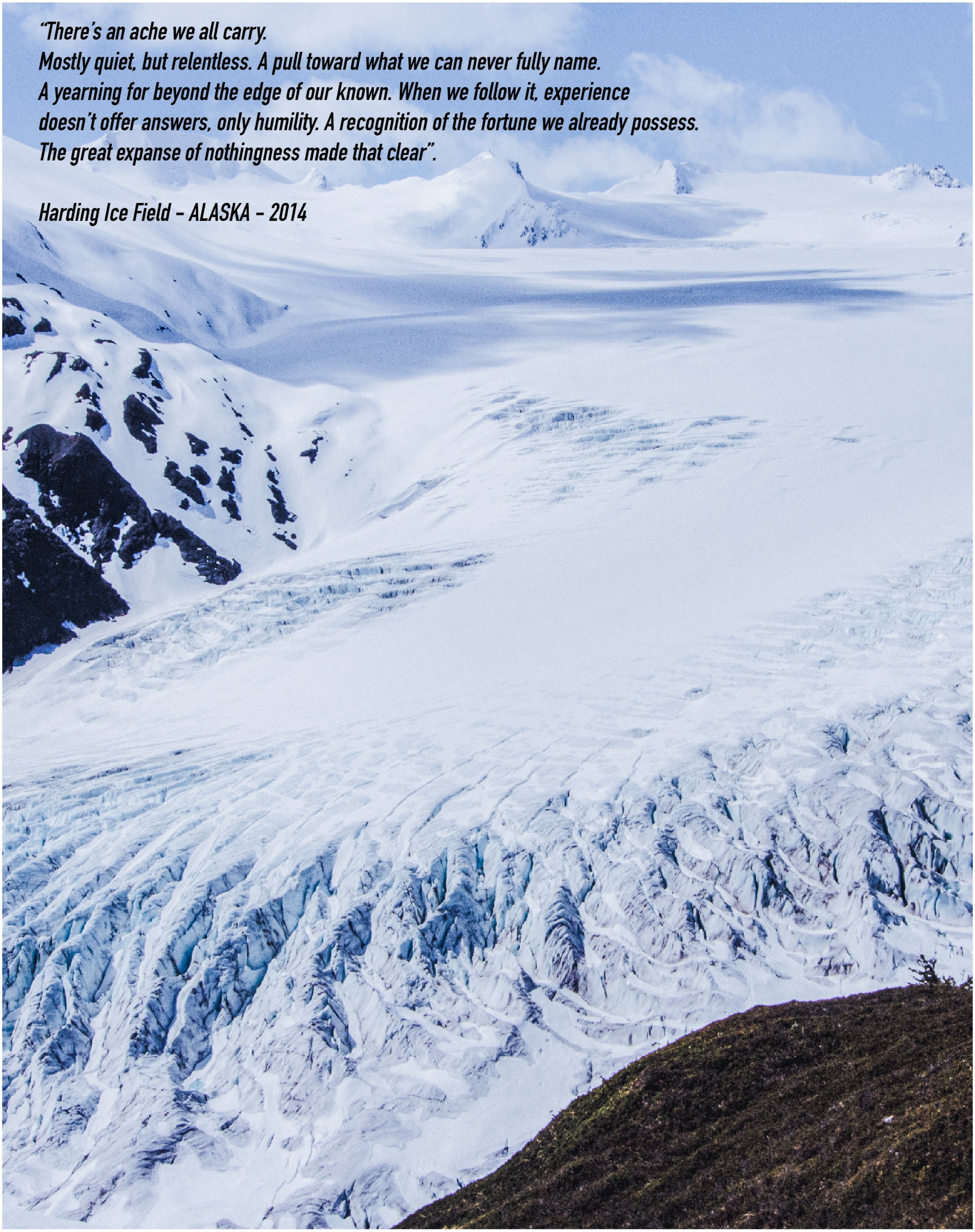


Leh, TIBETIAN PLATEAU *“Altitude and Attitude”*
Just out of the airport and a pickup truck barrels past, stacked with women in ornate wears. Laughing, waving, shouting something you’ll never translate. You smile like an idiot and wave back. You’re the outsider, the tourist, the guy wrapped in Gore-Tex and assumptions. They don’t care. Leh’s been surviving at this altitude for centuries, our arrival barely ripples the dust.

Rajasthan, INDIA *“Built on Dust and Defiance”*
Rajasthan isn’t a place. It’s a collision. Sand turns to stone turns to city in the space of a sigh. The roofs stack like Tetris pieces built by someone drunk on color and chaos. You walk the alleys. A cow blocks your path. A child offers to sell you tours. A man insists his chai is the answer to your life problems... But food poisoning ain’t.
There is no soft entry here.

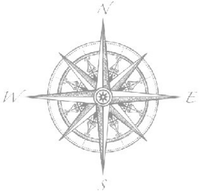
Route Saddle, NEW ZEALAND *“Old Earth”*
No traffic. No chatter. No people. No phones. Just the wind threading between ridge-lines and a silence that heals a loud & busy mind. You crest the saddle, and the lake appears, black glass surrounded by cliffs that look carved by giant gods with knives. Somewhere behind, your knees hate you. Ahead: more distance. But you don’t mind. These places arn’t meant to be easy.

Khe Sanh, VIETNAM *“Guns, Grass, and Ghosts”*
Grass has grown around it. Tourists take selfies with the sandbags. Somewhere in the dirt are shell casings and bones. Maybe someone’s letter home that never made it. Khe Sanh was hell once. Now it’s a museum with a small gift shop. The jungle swallows the history as you stand by the turret. No rain. No thunder. Just heat. Just the lingering of something that doesn’t live here anymore, as Vietnam never shouts about its past.



"There's an ache we all carry.
Mostly quiet, but relentless. A pull toward what we can never fully name.
A yearning for beyond the edge of our known. When we follow it, experience
doesn't offer answers, only humility. A recognition of the fortune we already possess.
The great expanse of nothingness made that clear".

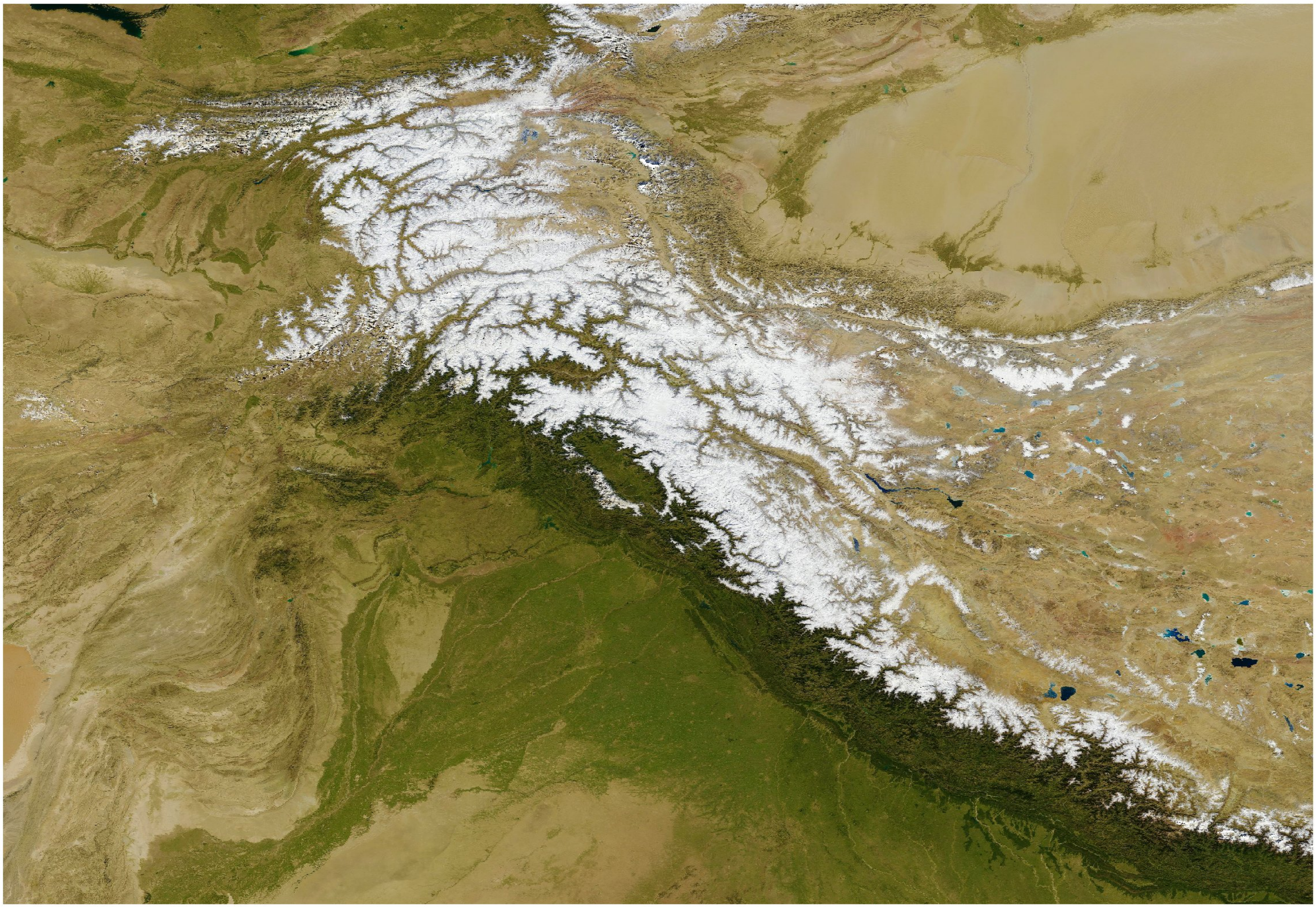
Harding Ice Field - ALASKA - 2014



Northern India / Tibet Border:

The Tibetian Plateau

Tibetan Plateau (India)



32.0000° N – 88.0000° E

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"Each person must repay their own karma"

A Tibetan proverb emphasizing personal responsibility and the law of cause and effect.

ROLLS
RR
ROYCE

I glimpsed a vanishing world wrapped in ritual and stillness, fragile as smoke, steady as prayer. Its language rooted in beauty and fragility, quietly slipping away under the erosion of time“

– June 2023

LEH:

Chinese-occupied Tibet can only be traveled with a government-approved or designated travel company on a fully escorted trip in order to protect China's narrative of the country after its invasion, suppression, and forced occupation. The checkpoints, the mandatory guides, the approved itineraries, every step is carefully curated to ensure that only one version of Tibet is seen, the one rewritten to fit a government etched narrative.

So, in order to travel freely, the Ladakh District within the far North of India was where I headed. Here, the land was still a little untamed, the mountains untouched by propaganda, and the people still living in alignment with centuries-old Buddhist traditions. Ladakh, often called "Little Tibet," exists in a realm that the modern world has yet to fully claim. The air is thin (at alltitude) but electric with something unbroken from its past, and an untarnished history.

It was either a bus over a period of two and a half days over the Himalayas with no guarantee of making it through the mountain passes, as the snow had yet to melt this early in the season. Or pay $65 for a flight on a 22-seater, 4 hours North. This time, it was about the destination, not the journey, so by plane it was.

Leh District exists in a world apart, cradled within the vast, wind-carved folds of the Himalayas, where mountains rise like waves, swallowing roads, villages and entire histories in their shadows. At an altitude of over 11,000 feet, the air here is thin and dry, every breath a conscious effort, every step heavier than it should be. It is a place where the modern world fades, where the hum of cities and the rush of time feel impossibly distant, left behind in some lower, more hurried realm. The sky is sharper, bluer, stretched taut over peaks that seem to scrape against its surface.

Beyond its whitewashed homes and mud-brick buildings, there is nothing but rock, sky, and the long, undisturbed silence of the mountains. To the west lies Kashmir. Volatile and guarded. To the east, beyond a landscape of barren ridges and glacial rivers is Tibet. The homeland of many who now walk these streets in exile. After the Chinese invasion, waves of Tibetans crossed the brutal, high-altitude passes on foot, escaping not just political persecution but the systematic erasure of their culture. Those who made it found refuge here, among the Ladakhi people, where the land still spoke their language and the monasteries still rang with the same prayers. Many stayed, building a life in this Himalayan sanctuary, as the home they once knew was no longer theirs to return to.

Even at the airport, there was no bargaining with the taxi upon arrival. The streets were cleaner, the prayer flags fluttered, and the people seemed genuinely happy. I wandered the old streets up to the palace overlooking the town. I wandered the quiet alleys, sampling foods and the hospitality of warm welcomes. I quietly entered temples to witness the townspeople's devotion.

That evening I rented a 125cc motorbike, nowhere near enough power but suitable for my lack of experience. I exchanged enough money to last the trip and packed the essentials, just a small backpack with must-have items and my camera. With everything set for the morning, I spent the evening on the balcony of a family-run restaurant overlooking the town's main square. Below, the pavement bustled with life. Tibetan exiles, digital nomads and travelers from all over, shoulder to shoulder. No one came here for the town itself. They came for the outskirts.

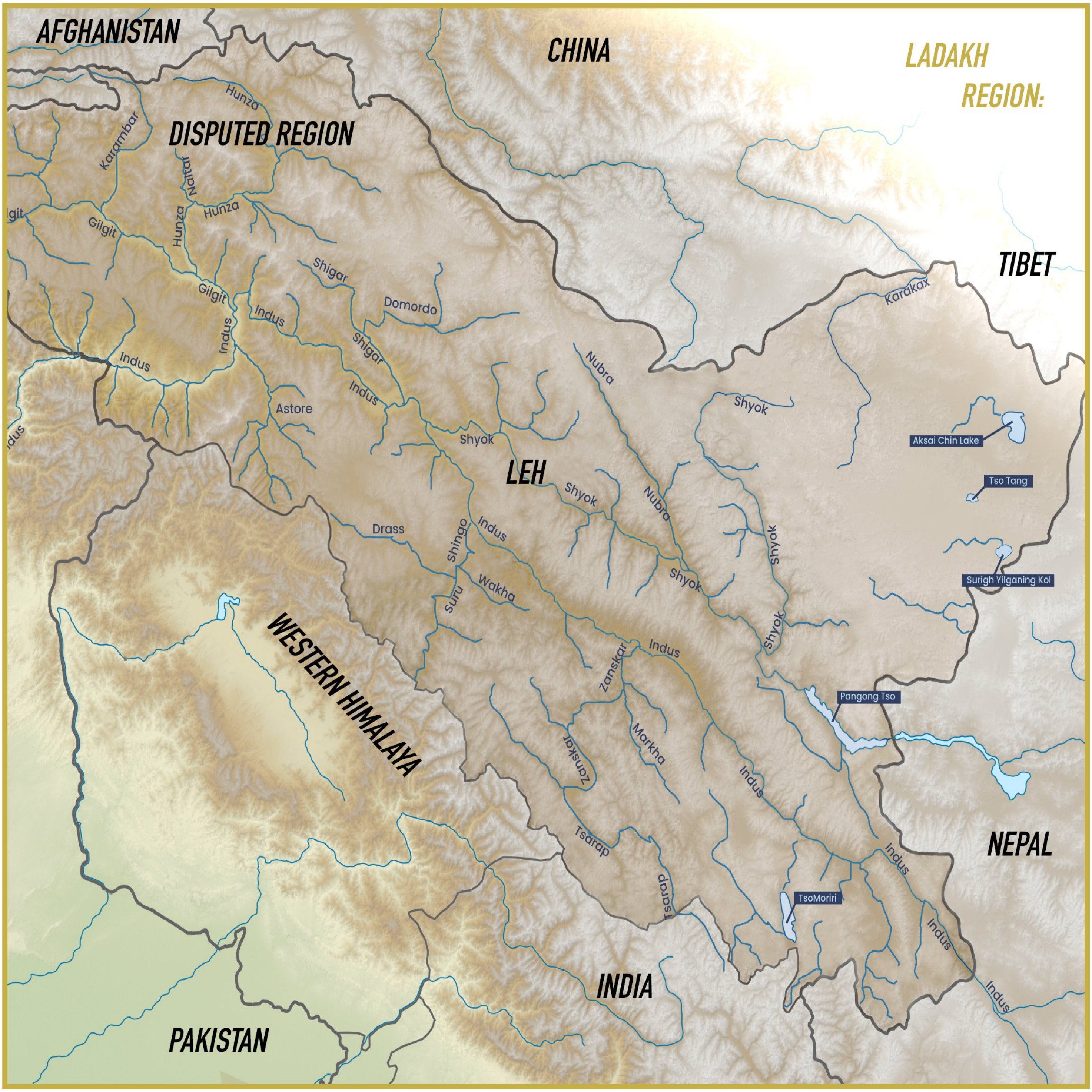
The following day, I slowly navigated out of town, where the streets stretched like fingers into the surrounding landscape. I rode past small industrial businesses, the air thick with dust and dry heat. The altitude made every movement feel heavier. The first stretch of the ride was more tense than enjoyable.

Trucks and buses barreled past on a pothole-ridden, barely double-lane road with no markings and no gutter. Just the occasional patch of loose gravel every few kilometers to test my balance and make sure I was still paying attention.

The small roadside buildings slowly gave way to nothing but space, dust, and more space. An endless expanse of earth framed by the ever-present Himalayas above. Gas stops were now nothing more than roadside stalls selling petrol in re-purposed Coke bottles. The towns that began to appear were marked by the spread of a thousand poplar pines, their vibrant green canopies swaying in the wind, singing a song of their own.

I rode for around 60 kilometers, heading into the dust bowl of the extended Tibetan Plateau. My destination for the night was the Matho Monastery, a picture-perfect tiny village with only one paved road in, lined with old oak trees and imperfect bamboo fences.

"Here, dozens of nods and smiles from strangers eyes welcomed me".


AFGHANISTAN
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Donkey races are held where there are no horses. (When a fool becomes influential among fools.)

The monastery sat perched above the vast plains of the Tibetan Plateau. It was completely empty, not a soul in sight. I had expected to see a few other travelers, maybe a few dozen monks, but there was no one. It was a Buddhist holiday, and most of the monastery's inhabitants had gone home for a few days. Only one monk remained. He greeted me with a simple nod and a quiet smile, then left me to explore the empty monastery alone.

For the first time in five weeks, I felt my world slow down. After a month of chaos traveling through Egypt, this place felt different, it demanded stillness and quiet. To rush through would be to miss the magic woven into the smallest details: The walls, lined with ancient scriptures, their delicate, timeworn pages filled with Tibetan script, each character painstakingly inked by hand centuries ago. Some were neatly stacked in wooden shelves, wrapped in faded cloth, while others rested on low tables beside flickering lamps, their edges curled with age. The air smelled of wax, incense, and old paper, scents of devotion that had lingered here for generations. The monastery's doors were works of art in themselves, hand-carved from heavy wood, their surfaces worn smooth by time and touch. Layer upon layer of ornate patterns swirled across them, each groove and embellishment telling a story of gods and guardians.

Wanting to experience the spiritual practice of these places rather than just the landscapes, I rode on to the Thiksey Monastery, the largest and most active in the region. It sat high above the tiny village of Thiksey, without a grand entrance or elaborate signage, slightly untouched by the flood of day-tripping tourists from Leh. By all accounts, it remained a functioning place of spiritual exploration.

I pulled up, then looked up. In awe. The building itself seemed to rise like a mountain, layered into the hillside, an extension of the land. It was a moment I had been yearning for. In my present awareness and somewhere deep in my unconscious. The monastery offered boarding for travelers and worshipers, with simple accommodations, a shared bathroom at the end of the hall and modest timber furnishings in a room that overlooked the village below and the snow-capped peaks in the distance. That afternoon, I wandered through its corridors, familiarizing myself with the layout, exchanging quiet nods with the monks and residents.

In the main courtyard, a few dozen travelers gathered, mostly domestic visitors from cities like Delhi or Mumbai, but few Westerners. The logistics of reaching this place was a journey in itself: at least four days of flights, overnight airport hotels, minivans, and the necessary time to acclimate. After all, Leh sat at 3,500 meters above sea level, and just arriving here was its own kind of pilgrimage.

The sun was setting, so I walked out to the large stupa at the entry to the monastery. *The giant prayer flags were clapping in the wild winds blowing off the Western Himalayas as a lone monk circled the prayer wheels.* I sat and watched as the blue sky turned purple, pink, and eventually into a lava orange that lit the snow with a glowing amber.

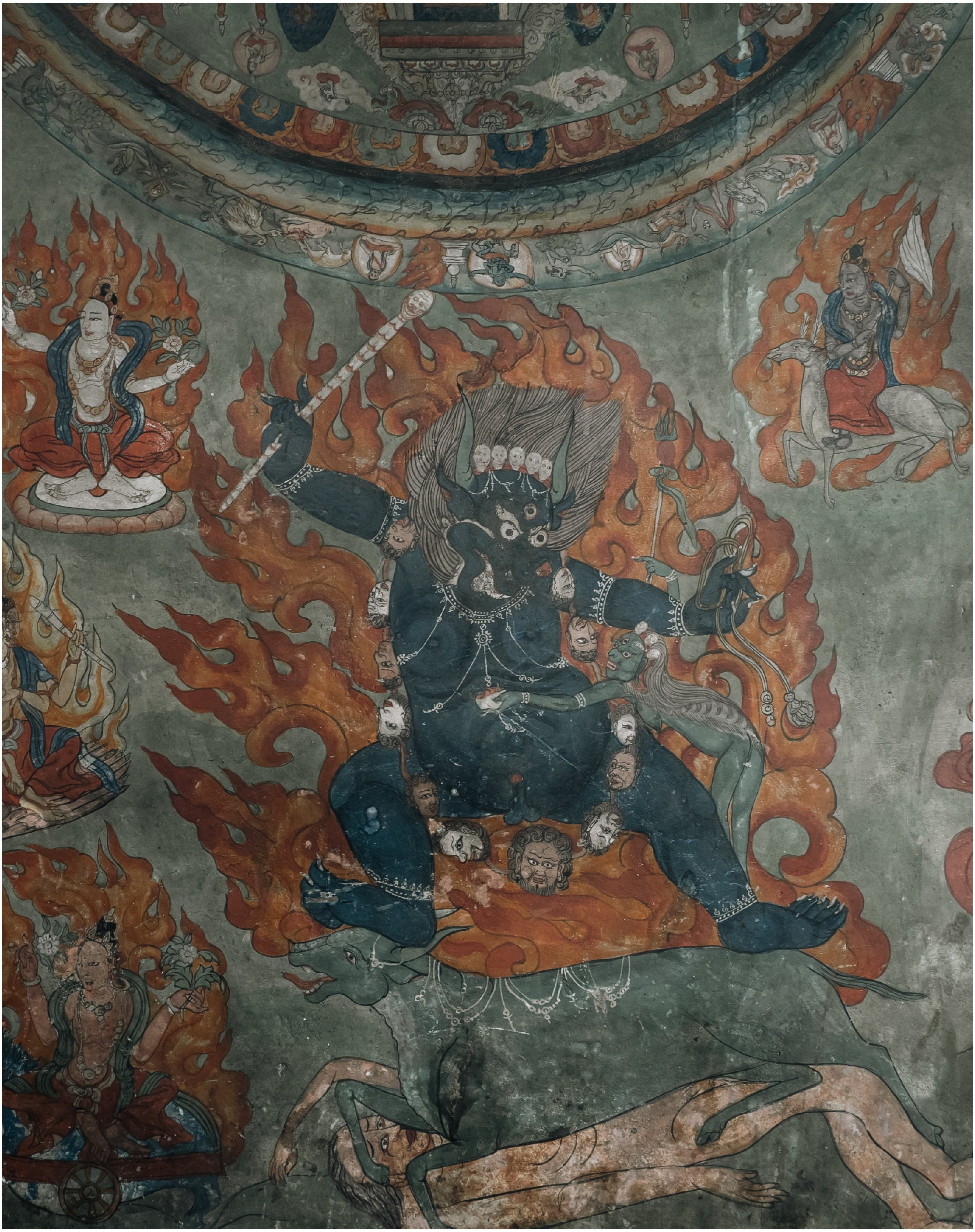
The following morning, I woke at 5am - blue hour, before the sun awoke from behind the peaks, as I was to sit in on morning prayers in the ceremonial room.

Cold and puffy-eyed, I slipped on my thongs and ventured up the winding stairs through the monastery into the courtyard, where on the roof, two monks aligned with the sun appearing over the mountains bellowed on ceremonial horns, echoing through the building and across the plains.

Following a link of monks, I began entering the hall, draped in maroon robes while quietly chanting to themselves. Upon entering, they all began reading the same scripture and a harmony of prayer began to fill the hall.

All in unison, they chanted and gave praise to Buddha in thanks for another day of his teachings as a thick bitter tea made of Yak milk filled all cups.

I repeated this for the following four days, both morning with prayer and evening with sunset. Re-training my mind to practice stillness in a world that demands urgency. Practicing patience within an impatient world. In the days that followed, I explored the surrounding valleys by motorbike, stopping to witness and experience a way of life that is deeply rooted in peace. Peace toward others and peace towards oneself.



Through these valleys and towns, the mighty Indus River flowed and life clung to its banks. Seasonal crops and towering poplar pines, fed by the glacial meltwaters of the surrounding mountains, flourished in spring and summer. But in autumn and winter, this desert landscape transformed into a frozen expanse, blanketed in snow. Most villages and monasteries shut down for the season as temperatures plunged to -25°C at winter's peak.

I vowed never to return to India after this trip. Not out of disdain, but because, after spending a combined six months wandering through its chaos, beauty, and contradictions, I felt the draw of the unfamiliar. The world is vast, after all, and there's an overwhelming abundance of cultures, landscapes, and stories waiting elsewhere.

But that vow wavered the moment I imagined life around the Himalayan monasteries, veiled under a soft blanket of snow. There's a serenity in that vision, a stillness that calls louder than any promise I made to not return. To witness prayer wheels spinning in the cold wind, monks wrapped in maroon robes against a pale white sky, and the slow, quiet rhythm of frozen life… it would be an experience unlike any other. A version of India untouched by the familiar, seen through the lens of silence and snow. Maybe Ill come back, but for now, I headed south, about 30 kilometers, to a small town on the edge of the mountains, where the Hemis Monastery sat at the base of a range. The following day marked the start of the Hemis Festival, a vibrant celebration of Tibetan culture through costume, parade, and dance. I decided to arrive early to take in any pre-festival activities and get a feel for the place.

When I arrived, the monks were rehearsing in the sprawling courtyard, moving through their steps without costumes, while the elders watched from the steps of the ceremony hall. A few others wandered the grounds, making final preparations for the next day's visitors. Apart from the couple of dozen monks, the place was relatively quiet. *That was, until the next*

A wave of color, sound, and movement erupted in the once-empty courtyard. Horns, brass, and percussion instruments blared from the balcony, setting the rhythm for the intricate dances and otherworldly costumes that swirled around the flag in the center of the space. Hundreds of villagers, dressed in woven silks and yak hide, gathered to watch in pure joy as their culture, usually quiet and reserved, unfolded in full celebration. In that moment, there wasn't a single unhappy soul on the grounds.

Elders with weather-worn faces beamed with pride. Children giggled at the masked dancers who stomped and twirled in exaggerated movements, reenacting centuries-old myths. Incense curled into the mountain air, thick and sweet, mixing with the scent of butter lamps and snow-damp earth. The monastery transformed into something alive, a breathing mosaic of devotion, memory, and resistance against time's erosion.

MEDIA

One month later, I found myself back in Leh, the town where I began. I returned the rented bike, indulged in my first hot shower in weeks, then sat once again on the same balcony, grateful for the warmth of my plate as I gazed over the familiar town below. I reflected on the expectations versus the reality of the trip, and as I ended up choosing depth over distance, I rode slowly, with no urgency, quietly, cherishing the little moments and being completely present in each passing day. A rarity for a modern mind.

The last two weeks on the bike passed in a steady, deliberate flow as I moved from village to village, town to town. The focus of my journey shifted; it was no longer about the landscapes, photography or the culture, in fact for the last 10 days my camera lay dormant at the bottom of my backpack. I saw in these people what I seeked in that time, a deep inner peace that only came with self acceptance after years of overly harsh self criticism. It was a trip where I begun to question the notion that happiness came in the seeking, and woke to find it must only come from within.

Karnak, Egypt:

Swatting flies and touts away as you enter the Old Kingdom, there's something challenging about trying to channel the spirit of the ancients while a man in a Chicago Bulls hat insists you need a camel ride "just for looking, my brother!" The sun is merciless in Luxor, hanging high above the stone like it always has, watching tourists squint up at the carved walls of Karnak Temple.

I wandered between pillars the size of redwood trunks, their surfaces etched with prayers and power, the legacy of pharaohs who once believed they'd achieved immortality. Their names are still here, clinging to these columns in a language time couldn't erase. It was beautiful. But also: chaotic. A kid tried to sell me a Luxor shirt made in China. A man claimed he could get me "secret access" to a forbidden shrine if I tipped him now and acted casual. Somewhere, someone's ringtone blared a Beyoncé song.

And yet, despite the absurdity, It did feel real. A brief silence, a shaft of light slicing through sandstone, you'll still, no doubt, be in awe. These places don't care what state you're in when you arrive: Hungover, jaded, spiritual, skeptical. It overwhelms you anyway. Not in a curated way, but in that raw, cracked-heels, dust-in-your-mouth kind of way.

Expecting a postcard. Nope. You'll leave with sand in your socks, sunburnt skin, a fly in your tea and a head full of gods.

Harvest Life - Northern VIETNAM:

This week began like most good ones do, without too much of a plan.

A big bus out of Hanoi, heading North into the folds of the country. Sleepless highways, plastic seats, and that strange half dream that lives between places. Then, a smaller bus, the kind with no schedule, just a driver and a direction, winding into smaller and smaller towns. Gravel replaced road. Trees thickened. By the time we reached the end of it all, it was 9pm. No streetlights. No welcome signs. Just a dead end dirt track and a wall of jungle.

There were two of us: me and a solo female traveler I'd met on the bus. Strangers stitched together by chance and necessity. The park we were meant to stay in wasn't reachable by car, only boat, usually, through a web of lakes and river fingers. But there were no boats at night. No reception. No real plan.

That's when the unmistakable sound of dirt bikes echoed from the dark.

That's how things work in this part of the world. The home-stay owner had sent a couple of teenagers from the community to meet us, riding dirt bikes through the jungle on a Thursday night like it was nothing. No GPS, no radio. Just word passed from one house to another until someone showed up. It wasn't a service. It was trust & kind generosity.

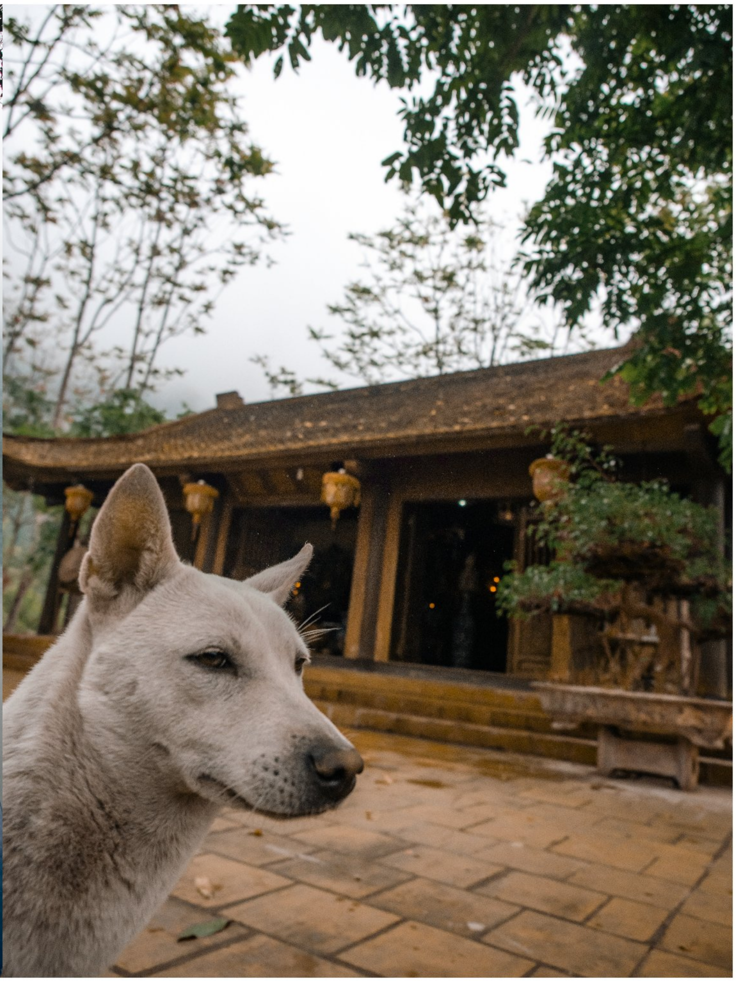
Three teenagers rolled up out of the dark, headlights cutting the mist like blades. No helmets. No introductions. Just wide smiles and two spare seats. Within minutes, we were riding into the jungle, through mud and mist, hanging on as the bikes thumped and skidded over roots and gravel. My bag was strapped to my back, the engine's growl in my ears, the beam of light bouncing ahead like a rope into the unknown.
And it felt amazing.

She went her way and I went mine. She was staying further down the lake, at a different home-stay, maybe another fork of the water altogether. We exchanged a final glance at the fork in the trail before our bikes split directions. That was it. And that's the thing about letting go of expectations. The less control you have, the more it all seems to all "work out". Whether by luck or something you build by believing in it.

That night I slept in a timber house on stilts, balanced over a lake I couldn't yet see. The man who ran the home-stay was kind, older, slow-moving, and proud. We sat cross-legged on the wooden floor, drinking tea, tracing routes on a paper map.

The plan: I'd kayak across the lake at dawn, hugging the cliffs and weaving through inlets to reach a remote rice-farming village. A place with no road in and no internet. Just a narrow waterway to a place where time stretched thin and was dictated by the seasons.

When the sun finally came up, it came slow, veiled in fog. Otherworldly. The lake below was still as black glass & silent. I slid the kayak in and pushed off, paddle breaking the surface with a rhythm. It was cool. Damp. And the only sounds were birdsong and the low creak of bamboo jetty's.



The first place I found was a temple. Perched on a limestone outcrop, alone on the water. No boat tied up, no monk, no caretaker. Just a single white dog sleeping at the base of the steps like it had been assigned the duty by Buddha itself. It raised its head, blinked once, and let me pass, eventually acting as my guide as I wandered the temple grounds.

I kept paddling, hours passed. The lake narrowed, just twenty meters across at points, but the cliffs rose higher, thick with forest. Vines tangled like veins, and mist clung to the canopy like it was trapped under a dome. It could've been Borneo, or the Amazon, that rich, green claustrophobia. But this was Vietnam, still, just another hidden fold of it. Eventually, the water split again, a quieter offshoot, barely moving, leading deeper into the jungle. I followed. As the kayak moved forward, the walls of limestone softened. The land opened up. The mountains stood back. And just like that, the world changed.

Flatlands. Rice fields. Small wooden huts scattered like seeds along the banks. Ducks flapped clumsily into the water. Kids watched from under stilts. No one rushed. No one waved. Just life, uninterrupted and self-contained. A village of forty, maybe less. No neon. No karaoke. Just home, shelter, food, animals, and each other.

Two boys helped me pull the kayak up the muddy bank and tie it to a tree. They didn't ask why I was there, they already knew. In a place this small, word travels faster than paddles. Everyone knew a visitor was here.

It was hard to imagine, but just ten kilometers back the other way, long-tailed motorboats buzzed around the main lake, fluorescent life jackets, groups of twelve, tour guides barking into mics. Half an hour at this stop, pre-packed lunch at the next. In and out. Ba Be National Park: Done. Box ticked. And yet here I was, having taken the same route in a completely different way, slower, quieter & earned. The only other people I saw that day were two Europeans on kayaks, dreadlocks tied up in buns, faces lit up like mine when we passed each other. "Its so beautiful" with just those words and a look of "Yep - He's loving this too". Exploring slow and hard, with our hands and feet wet, board shorts still damp from every failed launch and landing. The reward wasn't a view or a temple. It was this time, the doing of it.

I met the matriarch of the small timber home where I'd be staying that night. Quiet strength. Bare feet. My room was a single timber bed, tucked inside a wooden room raised high on stilts and reached by a handmade ladder. No fan, no lock, just clean sheets and air that smelled like wood and water. I dropped my bag. Downed the last of my water. Slung the camera around my shoulder and stepped back out. No plans. No destinations. Just a slow immersion to see what was around.

Of course, there were no "sights" here. Nothing to tick off, no highlights marked on guides. It wasn't that kind of place. It was about presence, tapping into yet another way of life, watching it from the borders of understanding. And I've come to realize, over the years, that this is where my purpose in travel sometimes settles, not to step inside these lives, not to tether myself to one of them, but to walk the edges. To observe. To feel. To quietly witness the million ways a life can be lived. Not better, not worse. Just different. And maybe that's all I was ever meant to do. To not chase one single version of living, but to move between them as time and change shifts everything in waves. To see them before they vanish. To write them down before they blur. To take a picture. To encapsulate a time and how we used to live in it. That's the real gift. And the quiet weight of it never leaves.

The Village:

You follow the path as it curves along the cliff-side, where vegetable patches grow wild beside a drinkable stream. The air smells green, like coriander, water and weed. No signs or or fences, just crops determining borders. Around the bend, a timber home leans into a tree as part of its foundations. A pair of dogs laze on the concrete slab, watching you without concern. Above them, clotheslines sag with worn shirts and drying pants. Somewhere behind the house, a pot clangs, and a rooster clears its throat like it's got something important to say.

Out in the fields, a man walks through a sea of green. A bundle of sticks balanced clean across his shoulders. Up close, you see the cords in his forearms, thick, roped muscle like he could pinch straight through steel from years of harvest and haul. He pauses as you pass, nods, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hand-rolled cigarette. Holds it out. An offer. You don't smoke, but the gesture is welcomed. You nod back, grateful. In this place, kindness comes wrapped in small things: a nod, a smile, a shared pause beneath the shade.

Laid out on a haystack, limbs sprawled, eyes drifting skyward. He isn't bored. He isn't restless. Just being a kid. Breathing it all in. Watching the clouds do nothing and enjoying it. No screen, no schedule. Just the sun on his face and the freedom to feel it. It reminds you how childhood is supposed to be. Slow. Present. Unshaped by clocks or notifications. A quiet richness that gets lost in some places.

The trail winds past a home held together with rope, nails and willpower. A plastic tarp for siding and a tin fto deflect the monsoons. The jungle creeping in from the back like it wants to swallow the intrusion of "man made". Chickens dart under the frame and vanish into the undergrowth. A woman waves from a doorway as if she knows me, so I wave back.

And then you smell it:
Smoke and garlic, maybe fish, definitely firewood. A pot sits boiling over a handmade grill, blackened with age. A chicken watches from a few feet away, eyeing the setup like he suspects his cousin might be inside.

As you linger a man appears, same one from the field, or maybe the woman's husband, sent up the trail to see who's been eyeing off their dinner. He doesn't speak english (nor do I speak Vietnamese) he just gestures. A simple motion to the pot, then to you. An invitation. Dinner. No English spoken, not a word needed. Just bums on the floor and salty goodness.

And within this little moment, seated in a quiet corner, it reaffirms: The world beyond the well documented is still a kind and beautiful place.

Valley of the Kings, Egypt *“Where Power Rests”*

No signs. No ropes. Just tomb mouths punched into the rock like bullet holes. Walk the dust path long enough and the silence gets louder. Heat pushes down like an insult. The stones are the colour of bone, and everything feels unfinished, like the dead were interrupted mid-sentence. Inside, it's not somber. It's loud, murals raging in orange and gold, gods with animal heads throwing spells like gang signs. These arn't tombs. They are resumes of conquer. Built to outlive everyone.

Matanuska Glacier, Alaska *“Slow Beast, Fast Death”*

It's not the cold that gets you. It's the hum. A low-frequency groan underfoot, like the whole glacier's muttering to itself. Moving. Breathing. Plotting. The surface looks safe. White. Packed. Then you step close, leaning forward and stare into a slit of ancient blue, colder than existence, deeper than space. Your pulse thumps. Your imagination in horror. You quiver at the thought of being swallowed down into the abyss below.

Yangon, Myanmar *“Concrete, Palms, and Prayer Bells”*

The city grows in layers, Buddhist spires poking through coconut trees, colonial decay curling at the edges, satellite dishes aimed at Bangkok. It smells like diesel, clove cigarettes, jackfruit, and rain. Monks scroll phones in saffron robes. A guy welds a motorcycle frame barefoot while a woman balances baskets on her head across the street. The next corner, a business meeting, a karaoke bar. A BBQ.

Valley of the Queens, Egypt *“Long Before, Long After”*

Less famous than the kings, but louder in color. More complex & more divine. This Valley doesn't bother with the drama. It goes straight for beauty. The tomb walls explode, cobalt, vermilion, ochre. Everything sharp as hieroglyphs march across the stone in military precision, wrapping the queens in protection spells and divine flattery.

"I lean into conversations with strangers that would never happen at home. I sleep rough, rise early, eat what's given & look for more. I learn lessons the hard way, but they stick".

Ha Long Bay - Vietnam 2022

HANOI:

I took this trip out of necessity - To re-spark something undescribable .
Vietnam, again. A third time. I guess there's always an unseen gravity pulling you back to the things you love.
The things that make you feel alive. Even if it's just a place.

I'd (very gratefully) ticked off so many boxes on a list I once thought defined a full life.
And yet, when I arrived, there was a strange emptiness, as if the path I'd followed had abruptly ended.

But I stayed. An exhausted soul. And I just kept moving. Every day.
And over time, I began to feel that flicker again.
I kept moving until it became something more.
Gratitude returned. Curiosity returned.
And eventually, a hunger for life's wonders stirred again.

Never let go of that rope, the one tied to safe harbors.
Even through the drift, it'll guide you back to better shores.

Before the Flood:

Before the streets swell with sandals and sunhats,
before the iced coffee stalls stir and vendors begin to
dance, Hoi An wakes.

From a timber balcony, framed in red silk lanterns,
I watch the town begin its bloom.
Bells chime from bicycles like polite laughter.
A woman pedals past,
her basket cradling mangoes or marigolds,
or something entirely else.

Below, the scent rises thick and holy:
coffee in hand, dark & sweet as molasses.
Hardwood smoke curling from someone's hearth.
Incense, permanent, always in drift.
The whole town mid-prayer,
sending messages to awakening gods unseen.

Someone lights a cigarette.
He leans against the frame of a narrow shopfront,
shirt loose, face still soft with sleep.
The first drag is slow,
an anchor to the day.
He sees me up here,
offers a glance that all languages speak.

No one else looks up.
The town moves in rhythm, as it always has,
slow, sure, indifferent to watchers passing through.

From up here, I am nothing but
a shadow slipping through shutters.

But I am grateful:
For the morning. For the slowness.
For the grace of not needing to belong.

For the peace, in watching the world from a quiet corner.

MYANMAR AFTER DARK:

No theme bars, no neon traps built for tours, no drink deals printed in English. Just streets that stay busy long after the sun's gone, and the sizzle of a country that cooks better in the dark.

The footpaths fill with smoke and clatter as folding tables are dragged into place. Steel bowls stacked on top of plastic stools, chili oil poured into glass jars still slick from yesterday. Men with beaded sweat, bellies exposed from rolled shirts and a million customers tend to the grills. Women chop herbs with hands that move faster than their eyes. Teenagers in football jerseys ferry plates between tables, dodging dogs and scooters without spilling a drop.

No menu's. You point at what you want, and it shows up ten minutes later, hotter than hadies. Whole fish blackened with charcoal at the edges. Grilled eggplant buried under garlic. Pork skewers licked with fire and served with a plastic basket of coriander, lime, and enough chili to break your bowles.

It costs almost nothing. You eat like you're rich. And when the first beer hits the table, the night opens up. You end up sharing space with strangers. No one asks, but you're suddenly elbow to elbow with a Canadian who is a pro snowboarder, a Burmese engineer eating a quick dinner alone, a German couple looking exhausted and sunburnt from 6 months on the road.

Conversation is slow at first, then fast. People share food. Pull faces of approval or denial at something never tasted prior. A few stories. Maybe even a future bus route to a place you didn't intend to go. A kind of unspoken agreement builds, we're here, so let's be here.

The plates are scraped clean. A bottle is split. Someone lights a cigarette. Nobody checks their phone. You lose track of time because nothing interrupts it. This is dinner. And for a few hours, it's exactly what you were looking for.

Other places in South East Asia have their own kind of chaos after dark. Red light districts and rooftop bars, DJs and neon slogans that sell debauchery. Myanmar doesn't bother. It leans on something simpler. Wood smoke. Cheap beer. Company. And it doesn't end with Yangon.

In Bagan, once the tour groups vanish and the e-bike batteries run flat, the real evening starts. Locals appear like actors from backstage, taking over the sand-covered roads with flat carts and food stalls. Children chase stray dogs. Grandmothers squat beside smoking woks filled with sizzling oil. The same plastic chairs. The same heat. But here, there's less noise. More dust. A kind of slow-burn rhythm that never mirrors the cities. .

金帝旅
SKYNET
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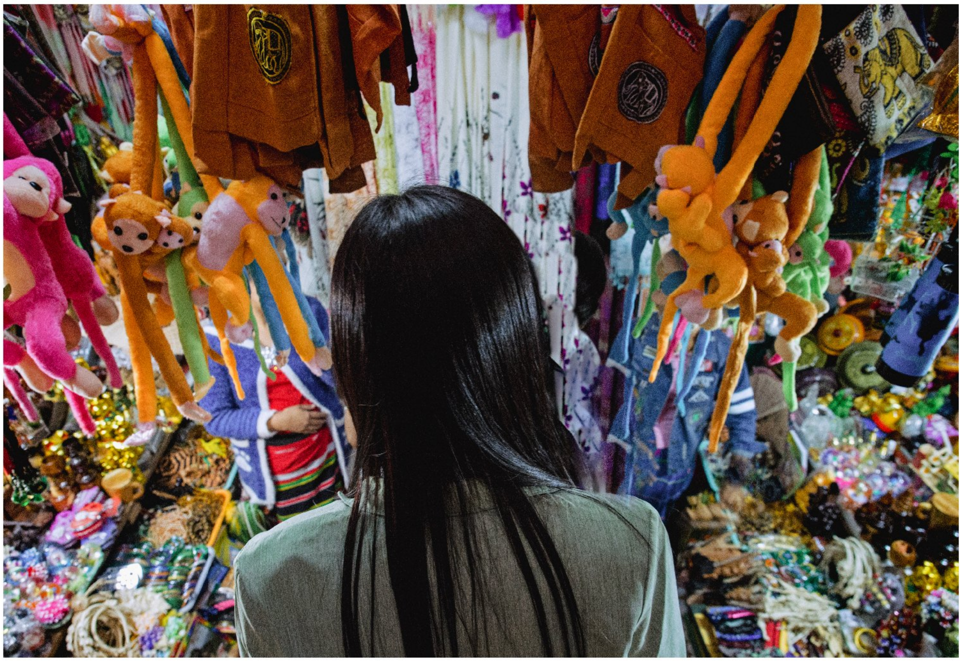
Follow the road far enough and you'll come across temples that no one put in a guide. They lean sideways under the weight of time, bricks flaking, paint faded to the colour of dry bone. Tucked behind them: little altars and smaller shrines, some barely taller than your knee. And in the dim light of a hanging bulb, you might spot the slow, thick movement of a python sliding past a Buddha statue. No one is worried. No one points. Pythons belong here too. Reincarnates of love ones past.

A monk walks past it, broom in hand, bare feet flicking up dust. A woman lights incense. Nobody's disturbed. It's just another night. You start to understand that reverence here doesn't have to be advertised. It just the way of life.



One night, somewhere between Old and New Bagan, I ended up cruising through an little village. Not really lost, more like a detoured as I didn't want to day I had to end. A boy on a bike, who as I rode past yelled "dinner" "dinner" said his Mum made the "good best food" He was right. The stall was nothing more than two crates, a metal tray, and a fire pit under a tarp.

There were no other foreigners. Locals eyed me for a moment, then went back to their own plates under lights that flickered with insects. The boy waved me into a seat and disappeared. I ordered by pointing at what everyone else was eating. The mystery meat was smoky, laced with lemongrass, served with jasmine rice and a cup of broth.

A man across from me raised his glass. "You like?" he asked. I nodded. He offered me betel nut after the meal. I declined. He laughed and chewed one anyway, teeth stained, grin wide.

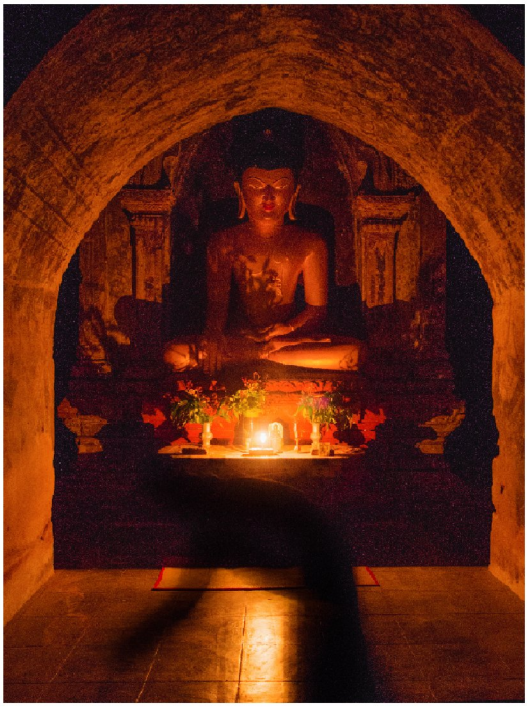
I paid what they told me. It wasn't much. I rode back in the dark with a belly full of smoke and meat with a fulfillment that I still can't translate to words on a page.

This whole set-up runs on instinct. No paperwork. No branding. Just some work ethic, a wok, and the will to feed people. Someone opens a grill beside a motorbike repair shop. Someone else balances a wok over a bed of burning coals. No council rules or fees found here.

You keep meeting the same people again in different cities. The solo traveler from Yangon reappears in Mandalay. The Spanish couple from the tea shop shows up at sunrise in Bagan. You're not friends exactly, but there's a loose-knit thread that ties these faces together. They watched you eat something too spicy. You laughed at their pronunciation. You passed the chili sauce without asking.

This is the camaraderie that forms when the way to choose to travel is still a little wild. When there's sweat behind every meal and sand between toes. You don't dress for a meal or have set times. Myanmar's nights are not built to schedule or to entertain. They're built to continue. To make use of every hour left in the day. To offer a stool and a bowl and a space to sit.

You stay. Till coals are extinghished and tarps are folded. Not because you're tired, but because moving would admit the night is over.



Aswan, EGYPT *"The Quiet Side"*

They moved down the alley with a slow certainty. Rubbish scattered on the path, shadows trailing behind them in the yellow dust. It was noon, but the street was nearly silent. Even the flies seemed to pause in the heat. *There was no story here*, not one that needed telling or that anyone would benefit from reading. But sometimes it just to witness the vast extent of life on our planet.

Kenai Peninsula, ALASKA *"Travel Brouchure Circa 1999"*

The trail cut through a valley that looked computer-generated by key words like beautiful or paradise. Mountains, snow, sky, the whole cliché. You take rest. Down below, the river coiled. Cold, but irresistible. No one else was around. Not even a footprint in the tundra. Completly alone. You stood there a while, until the wind shifted and reminded you that this vision had been long dreamt, but now, had been lived.

Ha Long Bay, VIETNAM *"Fishy Life"*

The man on the dock waved you in like he'd been expecting you. The kayak slid past cages full of writhing fish, and plastic jugs lashed together like rafts. Kids played, doing backflips into the green waters. A woman squatted over a pan of oil, flipping something unrecognisable. Most probably fish. It wasn't exotic. It was their home.

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HE PLACE TO BE
WARNING
NO TRESPASSING
VIOLATORS WILL BE SHOT

Uluru, AUSTRALIA *"Red Center"*

The cold began, it was unrelenting and stopped at nothing. Stars appeared above, sand cooled below, wind throughout. Not a feeling usually associated with the outback. Inside tools dangled from the ceiling like ornaments on a mechanic's Christmas tree as the rock sat in the distance, the last thing to feel the warmth of the fading sun on its skin.

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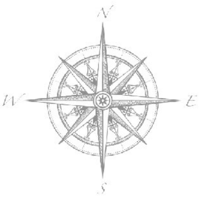
The Mekong Delta

South / East Vietnam



The Mekong Delta (Vietnam)

10.2415° N, / 105.9582° E
"Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây"

"When eating fruit, remember who planted the tree"
A Vietnamese proverb emphasizing gratitude and remembrance.

The Mekong:

Billboards for mobile plans rise not along highways, but hover above the bronze currents, strung up on stilts beside rusted tin homes. Out here, vessels don't ride on four wheels but float on timber hulls, patched and weathered, collecting silt, produce and the day's earnings.

Life is lived on the water, in the heat, in the hum of boat engines and the rhythm of tide and trade. It's a beautiful kind of adaptation and resilience. And watching it all from the bow of a slow-moving boat, I couldn't help but feel the weight of perspective, how easy it is to take comfort for granted. The running water. The roof that doesn't leak. The fridge full of food. We live lives of quiet luxury, and seeing this… not with pity, but respect.

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CỬA HÀNG BÁN LẺ XĂNG DẦU CTY TNHH MTV XĂNG DẦU "TÂM PHÁT"

I took the early bus from Ho Chi Minh to Can Tho. It was loud, slow, and humid inside, and nobody spoke. When we arrived, there was no station or welcome sign. The driver stopped, opened the door, and that was that. I stepped into the street with my bag and only the outline of a plan.

The scooter came from a Facebook post as there were no rental places. Just a lady with a two Hondas, no shopfront or signs. Her house was buried down a narrow alley behind metal gates and white walls covered in pot plants. When I arrived, she answered the door barefoot and confused. She didn't speak English, so she called someone, her daughter, I think. We spoke for two minutes. I showed my passport. She handed me the keys. Helmet, scooter, deal done. It felt more like borrowing from a neighbor than a transaction. No fuss, no forms. Just a nod and off you go.

The first thing I noticed about Can Tho was how little it resembled the image in my head. I'd imagined something softer, sleepy canals, palm trees, boats drifting through morning mist. Instead: Concrete. Stagnant water. Loud streets and diesel fumes. Plastic bags in every ditch. It was a little underwhelming. Still interesting, still foreign, but not what I pictured when I thought of the Mekong.

I loaded the backpack onto the scooter, filled the tank, and took off. No real destination. Just south. A lap of the region over some 4 to 6 days. Whatever it took. Somewhere out there, I hoped, was the version of the delta I had in mind: Dense green, hanging palms, quiet river homes, food with no name and no menu. But for now, it was just traffic, dust, and the buzz of scooters that never stopped.

The road out of Can Tho was fine. Busy with trucks barreling past a bit too close, then quieter. Cars gave way to bicycles. Construction gave way to rice fields. I passed a kid carrying a fishing pole three times his height. A man squatting by a puddle smoking through a

I reached Vinh Long by the afternoon. Found a plastic table outside of what looked to be someones home, as this is how restaurants are found down here. They served me something that looked like chicken but tasted like fish, all while a boy in a Liverpool jersey watched me eat and didn't blink for ten minutes. I finished the meal, nodded a thanks, and continued heading South.

The road into Ben Tre began to change. Not the condition, it was still sealed, but the shape of it. It started too curl with the rivers. Everything narrowed. More canals. More bridges. Homes on stilts. The palms got thicker. Boats creaked along beside the road, loaded with things I couldn't identify. The kind of place where you stop checking the map and just start watching.

Somewhere past Cho Lach I took a wrong turn. It felt like the delta started folding in on itself. Every road led to another smaller one. No signs. No shops. Nothing running parallel, just snaking with the river, creating confusion of which way I was meant to be heading.

\I kept riding though estuary after estuary, palms leaning in, the road shifting between concrete and dirt. I stopped a few times just to take it in and hit a Vietnamese Red Bull to keep the buzz. There were alot of people around. Just no English, no maps, no idea exactly where I was. But it was good. This was closer to what I came looking for.

Eventually, I found a guesthouse that backed onto the river with hammocks and a laminated menu. The owner nodded. Room key. That was it. No check-in form. No up sell. Just another quiet transaction in a place that wasn't built for tourism.

Rain came later that night. Hard and sudden. I sat under the metal awning with a beer and watched the water rise up the palm trunks. A couple of kids splashed around down in the flooded street while a dog barked constantly at the thunder. Like rural television unfolding in real time. The bed was thin and the fan squeaked, but that night I slept so hard that when I woke, I was genuinely confused as to where I actually was.

Morning came soft and grey. The street outside was still wet, and the air smelled like soil and petrol. I left early, engine revs low, weaving past fishermen sorting nets and women in conical hats squatting over buckets of eels. The town barely stirred. A small boy on a bicycle waved at me as I mounted the bike. What a start to the day, with a smile, no horns honking, no traffic lights, no baristas who didn't want to be at work, just the slow rhythm of Delta life, an easing into the day.

The road from there was mostly single lane. At times, it disappeared completely, washed out by rain or replaced by plank bridges wide enough for a bike or two. I followed power lines when I wasn't sure. They always led somewhere, usually to a cluster of homes painted in sherbet tones, laundry drying between mango trees and roosters scratching at the roots.

Trà Vinh. The houses got denser. More people. Khmer temples with gilded gates appeared like hallucinations in the green. I stopped at one and watched monks sweep water from the tiles with palm-frond brooms. One looked up with a dissaproving look. As if to say "Why the hell are you watching me sweep". Good point I guess. His life was simple, but to an outsider, it was interesting because it was so different.

Sustenance came from a roadside stall with plastic stools and no roof. I pointed at what someone else was eating (the best way to order) and got a bowl of something steaming and red. It burned in a good way. The woman who served it gave me a napkin and a toothy grin like we'd shared a joke. (or maybe she wanted to see my face after all the chilli)

After Trà Vinh, the land got flatter. The horizon widened. It was all banana trees and slow water. Buffalo stood knee-deep in the flooded fields, unmoving like statues. I passed a watermelon boat tied to a stump, the fruit piled high and wet with river spray. Two shirtless boys slept on the roof, arms over their eyes, mouths open to the sun.

By the time I reached Đại Ngãi, the sun had shifted completely from flashes of gold to just blank white. It felt like the sky had thickened. I stopped on a bridge to watched a lady row a wooden boat through a channel the colour of coffee. She moved without urgency, dipping one oar in, then the other, like it was just muscle memory. The roads here no longer made sense. Some led to ferries, others to dead ends. I had to backtrack more than once. At one point, I rode through a flooded lane with water covering the exhust, sizzlng and bubbling away as it snorkelled though the waters. On the other side, kids in school uniforms and wet shoes laughed and pointed. The goofy foreigner awkwardly trying to balance on his scooter though a mear puddle.

I found a market by accident. No signs, just a sudden rush of sound and smell, fish stacked on ice trays, vendors fanning flies from duck eggs, babies crying, cleavers hitting wood. I parked and wandered, bought the most un-Vietnamese dish I could find, being an apple pie and a Sprite, while around me life continued to do its thing. A woman selling lottery tickets from a wooden crate. Another feeding her baby with one hand and shelling shrimp with the other. Life busy in every sqaure inch.

The owner of that nights homestay was a wiry woman with a cigarette glued to her lips. Everytime I saw her, without fail, a cigarette puffed. She offered tea and asked where I was going. I told her I didn't really know. Just having a look. She coughed / laughed and spat out a "Ok Ok". I figured anyway is the right way, as long as I keep moving enough to not question your path.

The next day met my vision. No towns. No stops. Just road and water, road and water, over and over. The river was never far. Sometimes beside me. Sometimes under me. I followed narrow paths between rice paddies and saw more buffalo & herons than people. A boy threw a net from a platform. Another sat on the edge with a phone playing music pressed to his ear. I waved. They didn't wave back, just watched like I was a strange fish drifting through their world.

There were moments the road disappeared entirely. At one point I had to cross a plank bridge barely a meter wide balanced on oil drums and tethered with ropes. Honestly, it was the most nervous I had been the whole ride. Please hold, stay steady, eyes where you wanna be. Another time I ferried the scooter across on a flat barge with a woman and a dozen ducks in plastic baskets. She nodded once and kept taking to me in Vietnamese knowing full well I didnt understand. Strangly, the barge smelled like soap, rice and feathers. And diesel. There was always diesel in the air.

The phone never came back out. But I didn't miss it anymore. You knew by the light where North was. I knew by the people when the river was near. I trusted the rhythm of the place, the slow bend of roads, the smell of wet vegetation, the way people turned their heads just before a market or village came into view. By the time I reached the northern edges of the delta, the water had started to retreat behind levees and fences. Concrete replaced mud. The roads re-straightened. Schoolyards reappeared, then ATMs, then factories. It felt like the world was reminding me that things were getting back to normal, or whatever modern calls normal. Back to rules, signage & structure.

THANH PHO MY THO

I followed the traffic toward Thủ Dầu Một, past brick kilns and flat bridges, past shrines clinging to the edges of rice paddies. It was less beautiful, maybe. But not less real. The Mekong wasn't a postcard as I once expected, it was a system, alive and moving, full of smoke and diesel and fish guts and wet green breath. I pulled over at a roadside café just before reaching the city. The place had hammocks tied between pillars and chickens underfoot. The coffee came in a little glass, strong and slow-dripping. Sweet with condensed milk. Nobody looked twice at the foreigner with the backpack and the mud-streaked scooter. I liked that. Everyone was just in their own private respite. The final hour was easy. Straight roads, light rain, nothing dramatic. As soon as the traffic started to thicken, I genuinely wanted to turn back and head to the quiet roads. I rolled back into Can Tho just before 2pm. Same streets, same noise.

I returned the scooter to the alley. The woman's daughter opened the gate this time, and quickly, out came Mum. I felt like a long lost family member returned although it was only a few days. Coffee was made, videos on phones shared, I washed the bike in the courtyard by bucket and before I begun the hunt for a bus back to Ho Chi Min City, a selfie together with Mum. It was a day of little interactions that had big impacts.

Her daughter asked if everything went okay. I nodded. "Where did you go?" she asked. I thought about the watermelon boats, the Khmer temples, the boy casting his net in perfect silence. The basin kids in the rain. The plank bridges. The dirt roads that led nowhere but to a place where an itch got scratched. The weight of the river, and the quiet of riding with no intention.

All three of us left. Id mentioned I was looking for a bus back to the city, "No worries" her daughter said, as she turned and walked down the alley waving goodbye. Back to work, back to her life. I was taken by the wrist and led the other way. No words, as no english. Neighbours called out things in Vietnamese with cheek, all in good humour I imagine, as the laughing said so.

Not far down the road was a shop front, signs all in Vietnamese. She sat me on a plastic stool and said Ho Chi Min with a smile and a pat on the back. I thought, "this ain't no bus stop or train station". But, as it does in Vietnam, it surprises. No more than ten minutes later a bright pink bus came to a halt. She grabbed my arm and walked me onto its steps while chatting to the driver and others around. I gestured "how do I pay" "cash" "cash" with a shrug, but she just pushed me on the bus with a wave. "You go"– "Ho Chi Min"

I sat in a window seat as she kept busy talking to others on the street for some minutes before the engine cranked over and we slowly began to move. She waited for it to leave, as if to make sure I was all tucked in and safely on my way. The kind of care only a mother would give. I waved goodbye out the window and she waved back.

XE KHÁCH
TÂN LẬP THÀNH
XE KHÁCH CHẤT LƯỢNG CAO
CHỢ GẠO ⇌ MỸ THO ⇌ SÀI GÒN
MỸ THO ⇌ SÀI GÒN
NHẬN CHUYỂN HÀNG

SOUVENIRS

The arrival is rarely the way we envisioned it.
We get close enough to feel the heat and to taste the salt.
But it's always that little bit different, or seemingly just out of grasp.
And maybe that's the point.

Moments weren't made to be captured or reached, only lived.

For me, travel, for better or worse, was the key.
Not an escape. Not a holiday. But a lifeline.
It gave me something to dream. Then something to chase.
It shook me out into the world.

Not everyone needs a passport to find presence, but it helped me.
You'll need to find your own way in. Your own key.
Whatever it is, use it. The days don't wait. And the beginning?
That already happened.

And if I've accumulated any toilet-door wisdom from witnessing
how a million lives are lived, it's this:

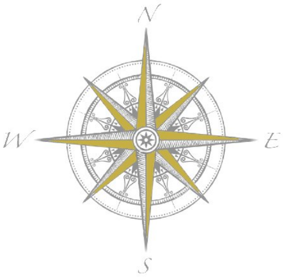
Don't dream too long:
Be present - cause that's the whole damn thing.

HOME

THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE

SOUVENIRS:
Tales From A Wandered World

Jacob Vincent Ball



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JACOB VINCENT BALL

Come wander.
Through the backstreets of Yangon.
Through ash-covered villages, flooded markets, and Alaskan silence.
Life beyond the familiar, in places less seen, and the million ways people live it.

These are the stories from just outside the frame.

SOUVENIRS

TC-607
TC-306

TALES FROM A WANDERED WORLD